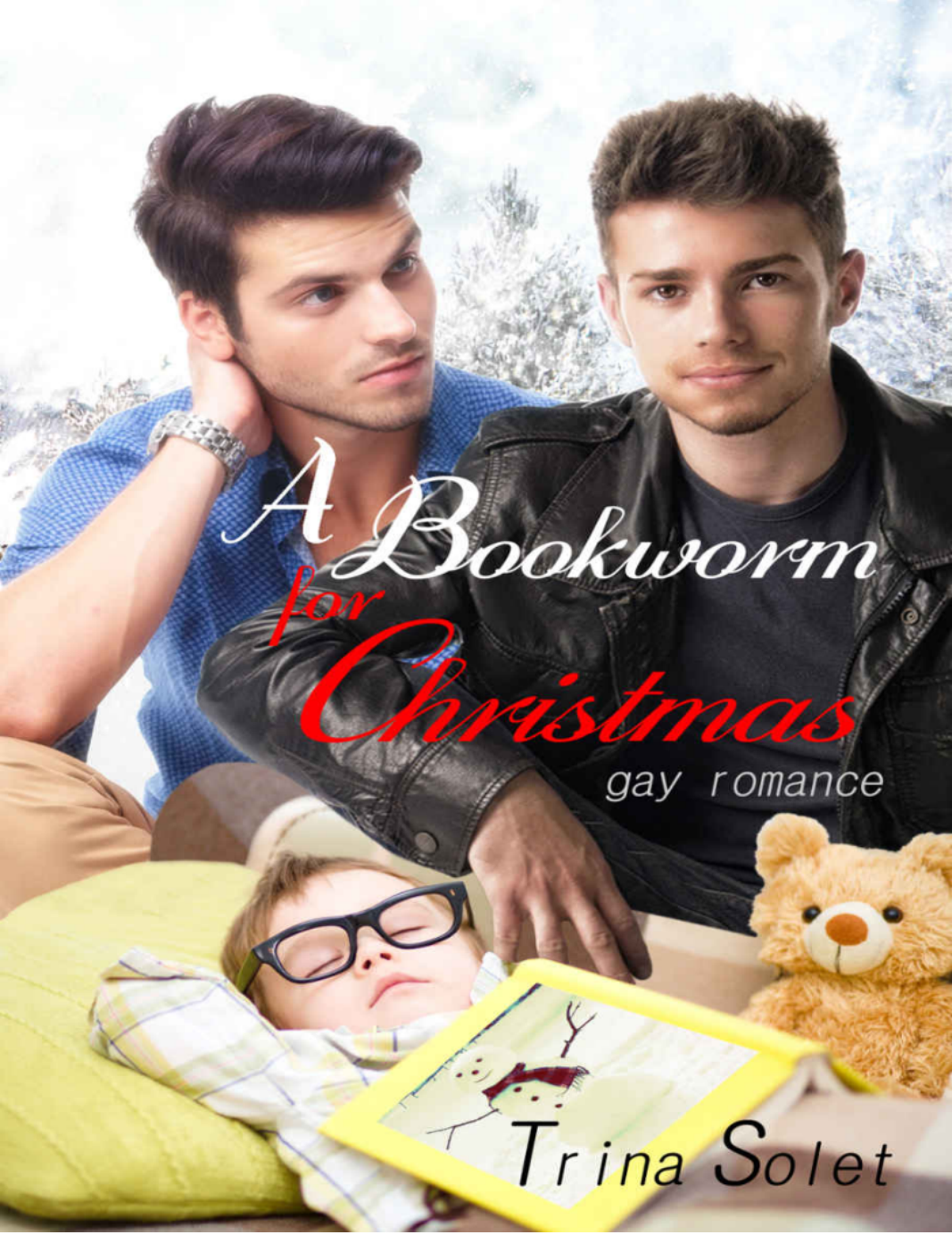
A Bookworm
for
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gay romance
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By Trina Solet
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A Bookworm for Christmas

Gay Romance

Trina Solet

Chapter 1

The sidewalks were crowded as Miles rushed to Vic's Diner. His breath fogged up in front of him. There was a serious nip in the air but no snow. It would be nice to see some snow around this time of year, but it wouldn't be fun to trudge through the sludge on the way to and from work. He only worked part time while he was in school and his shift was already over.

Turning a corner, Miles spotted the yellow Vic's Diner sign and rubbed his gloved hands. A guy who worked in the back office got a burger for lunch and triggered a craving. Now Miles had to have one of Vic's mushroom and swiss burgers.

He used to come to Vic's all the time when he worked at a bookstore nearby. Now it was a little out of his way but today he decided it was worth the walk. Pushing open the diner door, Miles breathed in the scent of good cooking and let it stoke his hunger even more.

The place was packed so he had to wait for a seat at the counter to open up. He wasn't the only one. A few other people were huddled just inside the door to keep out of the cold, but every time the door opened a gust of chilled air blasted them.

If he didn't crave that mushroom burger so bad, Miles would have given up and gone somewhere else. He scanned the booths though he had no chance of getting one of those. That's when he spotted a familiar face, and this familiar face was eating alone.

It was his old boss Gavin Fielding from the bookstore, or more like his young, handsome ex boss. Miles shouldn't have been surprised to see him. The bookstore was only a few blocks away. Going right over to his table, Miles was ready to ask if he could sit with him. That's when he noticed that Gavin wasn't eating alone after all.

"You're short. I didn't see you there," Miles told the little boy sitting across from Gavin. He was so startled to see the little boy that he didn't even say hello to the man he used to work for.

The boy, who was only four or five, gave Miles a fierce look. He wore glasses and had light brown hair. Miles could see his feet kicking under the table.

"Who's your short date, boss man?" Miles asked his former boss.

Gavin gave him a wry look then told him. "This is my son, Benji."

"Benji. Good name," Miles said to him, and the little boy looked pleased to hear it, but also cautious.

"The rude man is Miles. Say, 'hi, nice to meet you' to the rude man," Gavin said to his son.

"Nice to meet you," Benji said as instructed.

"I can't believe you have a kid," Miles said and sat down without

being asked. He slid over in the booth until he was sitting right up against Gavin. Gavin moved himself and his phone over to the other end of the booth.

"Who invited you to join us?" Gavin grumbled though he had just made room for him.

Miles turned to him and grinned devilishly. "Just living up to that rude label you stuck on me. You wouldn't want me to go hungry, would you? Plus this way I free up a spot at the counter for someone else." Miles pointed to the cluster of people waiting for a seat to open up.

"I guess we can put up with you if it's for the greater good," Gavin said while his son went back to drawing in a yellow notepad.

It turned out that they had only just ordered. Miles put in his order as well. His burger and fries arrived only a little after Gavin's minestrone soup and Cesar salad and Benji's grilled cheese and tomato soup. Gavin reached over and took away his son's notepad to make him focus on his food.

"I don't remember this place being so crowded," Miles said as they ate. "I usually got takeout, but I never saw people waiting for a seat."

"They closed that sandwich place down the street," Gavin told him and nodded in the direction where the deli used to be.

"Sammy's Deli. Too bad. They had those great, big, spicy pickles," Miles said with a shake of his head.

Benji had his head down over his soup but he became more interested in what they were saying as soon as pickles were mentioned.

"Aha, a pickles fan," Miles said and pointed at him.

"He likes pickles," Benji said leaning over toward his dad. He said it almost like he was making the argument that if Miles liked pickles, he couldn't be all bad.

"I used to get sandwiches from the deli for me and your dad for lunch," Miles told the kid.

"And sometimes you even got my order right," Gavin complained.

Miles laughed. "Let me tell you, that was no accident. You always ordered either turkey or roast beef on rye. I wanted to mix things up."

"Did you work with my dad?" Benji asked.

"I used to. He was my boss."

Gavin felt compelled to elaborate on those simple facts. "Yes, but Miles here thought that the job was too boring, so he quit and left me shorthanded for Christmas that year."

"Hey, don't try this in the court of public opinion. I got a job at Turn, vintage vinyl as far as the eye could see, and they wanted me to start right away. Cut me some slack," Miles said in his own defense.

"I heard they closed," Gavin said, but he wasn't gloating about it.

"Yeah. Saddest day of my life."

"You are so young," Gavin told him.

"And you are such a dad," Miles shot back, but he meant it as a compliment.

"Yes, he is," Benji agreed. He leaned toward Miles, his eyes earnest behind his glasses. "He's my dad." He said it like he wanted there to be no confusion about that fact.

"Suits you perfectly," Miles said to Gavin then saw a waitress coming their way. He wasn't done with his burger yet, but he clapped his hands together and got ready to order dessert. He was getting Vic's fried apple pie. That was another thing he hadn't had since he used to work for Gavin. He missed out on a lot of goodies while not working for him. Not least of which was the opportunity to ogle his boss while getting cut down by his deep voice and his gorgeous blue eyes.

As Miles watched him out of the corner of his eye, Gavin ran his hand through his dark brown hair and sighed. "Now I have to get him dessert too," he said and allowed Benji to order a brownie.

"I guess I'm a bad influence. I feel terrible about that," Miles said and winked at Benji.

Seeing Benji grin at Miles, Gavin frowned. "That reminds me. Do the opposite of everything Miles does," he told his son.

Benji only looked confused.

"Oh come on. Do I deserve that?" Miles asked and gave Gavin a pitiful look.

"Sometimes," Gavin said, but the cagey look in his eyes said that he couldn't really get mad at him.

The desserts were set in front of them and Gavin got a cup of coffee.

"And where do you work now?" he asked while Miles and Benji ate dessert and peered at each other conspiratorially.

"At this mailing and packaging place. It's only a part time, seasonal thing, boxing up gifts, shipping them out. Someone was shipping an acoustic guitar today. I'll need something more permanent after New Year's. You hiring by any chance?" Miles asked.

"Not at the moment," Gavin said.

Miles eyed him again while trying not to be obvious about it. His ex boss was just as good-looking as he remembered, maybe more so. The man was stern, tall and lean with broad shoulders. With that combination of blue eyes and dark brown hair, he was irresistible to Miles.

When he worked for Gavin, Miles had fantasized so many times about him. It was hopeless of course. At the time, Miles had just turned eighteen and started college. Gavin was a serious guy in his late twenties and he treated Miles like he was a high school kid or something.

After they were done eating, they all got up to put their jackets on. As they waited at the register, Benji held onto the notepad he used for drawing and a few colored pencils while mittens hung from the sleeves of his jacket. Gavin paid for their lunch and Miles' too.

"Thanks. You didn't have to do that. I did invite myself," Miles told him.

"You said you would be out of a job soon, didn't you?" Gavin said, reminding Miles that under that severe exterior, he was a really nice guy.

"Just in time for Christmas," Miles said. "I want to have another job lined up before New Year's hopefully."

"I'll let you know if I hear of anything," Gavin told him as they headed for the exit together.

Gavin made sure his little boy was all bundled up then they stepped outside. As soon as they were out the door, they stopped short as Benji's glasses fogged up. Gavin took them off his face and wiped them then put the glasses back on Benji. The little boy blinked up at him and nodded. Looking from father to son, Miles had to smile. They were quite a pair, and he found that he didn't want to let them go off without him just yet.

"I'll walk with you," Miles offered.

"We're going to the optometrist to have Benji's glasses adjusted. He's kind of hard on them," Gavin told him.

"I can still walk with you. I was just going to go home now anyway," Miles said.

"No classes?" Gavin said.

"Not today."

"And I guess you're not too busy studying," Gavin said pointedly.

"I study plenty," Miles told him defensively.

As they walked down city streets, they saw lots of people with shopping bags, sometimes even carrying wrapped gifts. Benji looked at the wrapped packages eagerly. To Miles, they were just a reminder of all the shopping he still needed to do.

"Candysaurus!" Benji exclaimed on seeing the candy store across the street with its sign that featured a blue dinosaur.

"You just had dessert," Gavin reminded him. But the begging look on Benji's face didn't go away.

Miles wondered if Gavin had deliberately stayed on this side of the street so they wouldn't pass too close to the store. "What do they have that's so good?" Miles asked Benji.

As he should have expected, Benji said, "Everything."

"Right now they have these snowflake candies and he's obsessed with them," Gavin said.

"No, I'm not," Benji claimed plaintively.

"You know what obsessed means?" his father challenged him.

Benji wouldn't admit to anything. He just made a funny face.

"Trust me, you're obsessed," his dad decreed.

"I want to be obsessed too. What are these snowflake candies?" Miles asked.

"They're good," Benji said.

"What a description. My mouth is watering," Miles said.

"They're just sugar in the shape of a snowflake with coconut flakes dusted on top," Gavin said as if that wasn't a good enough reason to love them.

"They have marshmallow snowmens too," Benji piped up.

"It's snowmen," Gavin told him.

"Sounds good. But I guess we both already had something sweet for lunch. We don't want to overdo it," Miles said to Benji. He didn't really want to be a bad influence on Gavin's kid. "Maybe some other time we can go to the Candysaurus and you can show me all the good stuff."

Benji agreed but Gavin looked at Miles skeptically. He probably thought it would be another year or two before they ran into each other again. Miles planned to make sure it would be sooner than that. Seeing Gavin again reminded him why he had to quit and also why he couldn't stay away any longer.

Chapter 2

Going about his day as usual, Gavin found that he had flashes of Miles, his smile in particular. It would pass. It wasn't like he was obsessed with him or anything. He was just a little distracted. That's why he almost missed what Benji was telling him as they walked from his kindergarten where Gavin had just picked him up.

"Guess what we did today," Benji was saying. "We made cards. I made you a card for Christmas, but it's a surprise. You can't see it."

"I promise to be surprised," Gavin told him and Benji smiled up at him.

Since Meredith was on duty at the store, instead of going straight back there, Gavin decided on a detour. "How would you like it if we visited Bruce and took him something for lunch?" Gavin asked Benji.

Bruce was the owner of Langford & Son Furniture and Benji's honorary uncle. He had a son, Marvin, who was two years older than Benji, but a good sport about playing with a "littler kid" as he liked to call him. Bruce's store was a little out of the way, but they could stop at Baker Man Deli and get hot sandwiches to take with them to the furniture store.

When they got to the deli and he saw they were getting only three sandwiches, Benji asked, "And for Marvin?"

"I don't think Marvin gets out of school until later."

Benji made a disappointed face but cheered up when Gavin bought a cup of small, crunchy pickles for him to munch on. The pickles made Gavin think of Miles again. He tried to dismiss him from his thoughts, but he wasn't very successful.

Having seen Miles so recently, Gavin found that he was too vivid in his thoughts – his unruly, light brown hair and golden brown eyes, his easy smile, the warmth that radiated from him. And he was older now, not freshly eighteen. There was no reason why Gavin couldn't dwell a little on how very attractive he was.

When they arrived, the furniture store seemed pretty quiet. A young couple was in the bedroom isle, frowning at prices, while two women were picking out a dining table with the help of one of the sales people. As he and Benji walked toward the back of the big store, Gavin noticed the familiar smell of the place. It was a mix of wood, upholstery, leather, furniture polish and floor cleaner.

"Hi, Uncle Bruce," Benji said as he ran through the store to Bruce's manager's desk in the back. The big man stood up from behind his desk and greeted Benji with a smile and a handshake. He waved Benji into one of the two chairs on the other side of his desk.

"Hi there, young man. Have a seat and let's do some business," he said.

Gavin gave Benji the bag with Bruce's sandwich and he handed it over.

"I see you didn't come empty handed. Nicely done," Bruce said as he opened the bag with his favorite, an eggplant parmigiana sandwich.

They all sat down at Bruce's desk to eat, and Gavin warned Benji not to make a mess. It was funny that they were eating at his desk when there were all those dining tables out there in the showroom. After he took a few bites of his sandwich, Bruce opened one of his desk drawers and brought out an elaborate robot, possibly a Transformer. He showed it to Benji.

"Check out what I got for Marvin. You think he'll like it?"

Benji's eyes went wide.

"That's a yes," Gavin said.

Benji confirmed it with a thumbs up and a big grin.

"Then I'll wrap it up and keep it a secret. You keep it a secret too," he instructed Benji, who nodded and pinched his mouth closed with his fingers.

"Open your mouth, please, so you can eat," Gavin told him.

After that, Benji made short work of his own breaded chicken sandwich, or as he called it the big chicken nugget sandwich. Done with the last of his food and all his pickles, Benji went to explore the store. He poked around all the alcoves set up to resemble furnished rooms, complete with fake windows and doors that led nowhere. For some reason, Benji had to try every one of those doors though none of them opened.

At least that kept him busy and gave Bruce and Gavin a chance to catch up as they ate more slowly. While they talked, Gavin just happened to mention running into Miles the other day and how they sort of had lunch with him. For no good reason Bruce latched onto this one insignificant event.

"Not bad. You had a little crush on him," Bruce said with a knowing grin.

"I did not. He was just a kid," Gavin told him.

"He was eighteen. I remember you made a point of telling me his age," Bruce said and pointed an accusing finger at him before taking a bite from what was left of his sandwich.

Gavin denied it though he didn't specifically remember what he said at the time. "I might have mentioned it in passing. That's all."

"You wanted to make sure I knew that he was legal so I wouldn't think you were a total perv. We hadn't known each other long back then, so you didn't want to make a bad impression. And you were so pissed off when he quit," Bruce said with an amused shake of his head.

"Because he quit with very little notice and right before Christmas," Gavin told him defensively.

"Aha. But you weren't that ranty and bitchy when that guy broke up with you. What was his name. Quentin?"

"Quinn, and the break up was mutual," Gavin said though he didn't know why Bruce was bringing up an ex boyfriend when they were talking about an ex employee. "And I wasn't bitchy."

"Let me ask you this, why do I even remember this guy Miles if he was just some nobody who worked at your store once upon a time?" Bruce asked with a raised eyebrow.

"You're asking me?"

"No. I'm telling you. You had a thing for him, and you couldn't hide that from someone as perceptive as me. So what's the deal? You gonna see him again?" Bruce asked.

"It was just a random run-in at a diner."

"You said you had lunch together. That's more than a run-in," Bruce reminded him.

"There were no other open tables," Gavin said exasperated that Bruce was using every little thing to build a case against him.

"So when are you seeing him again?" Bruce asked. Nothing Gavin said seemed to dissuade him.

"Never," Gavin replied flatly. They weren't likely to run into each other again, and Gavin wasn't about to go chasing after someone younger than him who wasn't even interested in him. Not that he was interested in Miles either.

But something strange did happen back then after Miles came to work for him. Gavin started to really like having him around. In fact he liked it more all the time, so that when Miles left, it was a vary painful shock.

Maybe that was because he had recently broken up with Quinn and he was lonely. That was also when he went on a blind date with Bruce, but they quickly decided that they should just be friends. With his big muscles and his confident grin, Bruce couldn't entice him, but his scruffy young employee stirred up all sorts of unwelcome, stray thoughts.

*

The day was chilly and damp with the threat of rain, but Miles had no right to complain about the weather. He shouldn't even be out. He was supposed to be doing some reading for a class, but he was too restless to concentrate. Going out for some fresh air, he found himself heading for Gavin's bookstore. His feet just took him that way.

As soon as he found himself standing in front of the familiar

storefront, the old feelings came back to him. A mix of relief and excitement had flooded him whenever he stepped through the doors of the bookstore. He was happy to be working there. But he was even happier not to be working for his grandfather, listening to his putdowns and not hearing a word from his Mom and Dad to defend him. That had been a rough time for him. The friendly chime of the door as he went in, even Gavin's glower if he was late, all of it soothed his pain in those days.

Gavin was so serious, steady, strong, unflappable. He was an inspiration to Miles. A smart, disciplined gay guy was the complete opposite of everything his grandfather said about gay people. No customer, no matter how unreasonable could make Gavin lose his cool. Miles wanted to learn that trick so he wouldn't blow up and curse at his grandfather until he was blue in the face.

Gavin was his oasis in those days even if they didn't get friendly or talk much. And being here again brought back the way Gavin made him feel, so hopeful, almost confident, not to mention attracted to him. Every other time Miles found himself interested in a guy, it was someone from school, a guy his own age. But for some reason his attraction to Gavin seemed more significant, more real. Something inside him said this is what it's all about, this man, this feeling. If only Miles stood a chance with him.

Shifting his focus from the past to the present, Miles caught sight of his own reflection in the store window. There he was in all his scruffy glory. His hair stuck up pretty much on its own. Good thing since that's how he wanted it. He had on his favorite leather jacket, or was it a coat. It was something in between and it kept Miles warm enough, but its main value was sentimental.

Miles went inside the bookstore to the familiar sound of the door chime. There were a few shoppers in there, milling around, and Gavin was behind the register with his head down. He must have been deeply absorbed in something if he didn't give a newly arriving customer a greeting. To get his attention, Miles spoke up from just inside the entrance.

"Welcome to the Bookworm. Let me know if I can help you find anything," Miles said in the same bored way he used to say it to the customers.

"Hi, Miles. Isn't that my line?" Gavin asked as he looked up at him in surprise.

"I see it's still called that," Miles said, pointing a thumb at the sign, the back of which could be seen on the glass door. It said Bookworm in simple, black letters. "I always wondered about that name. But I guess it's good if you want to make your books sound stale, old and

possibly vermin infested." Miles went over to lean on the counter next to Gavin.

For his part Gavin looked almost shocked to see him. "I wasn't expecting to see you so soon."

"I thought it was time I dropped by here."

"You never did before," Gavin mumbled then moved on to talking about the sign. "When I bought the store it was called The Bargain Bookworm. I decided to change it, but not too much. I didn't want to lose the customers I inherited from the previous owners. Didn't I ever tell you that when you were working here?"

"You didn't talk to me much back then. It was all 'shelve this, clean that'," Miles said and did a bad impression of Gavin.

"Do your job, you mean?" Gavin said pointedly.

"Yeah, you were a tyrant," Miles said but Gavin hadn't been a bad boss really. A no nonsense kind of guy, he seems standoffish and too serious, but really he was seriously hot. The worst thing about him was that he was so good-looking. And he seemed even better looking right now. Up close his eyes were a stunning blue, his jaw line was sharp, his mouth impossibly kissable.

So as not to give away what he was thinking, Miles turned away and started looking around, taking in all the changes since the last time he had been there. Right away Miles noticed that the kids' books section had grown a lot. As expected this time of year, Christmas and winter books were front and center, and a lot of them were about snowmen. There was a low, irregularly shaped, orange table surrounded by colorful footstools. That was new too.

Seeing what he was looking at, Gavin told him, "That's where Meredith does the kids' reading group."

"Meredith?"

"Your very capable replacement. She works the afternoon and evening shift so I can be home with Benji. She also does a lot of promotional work, reading time and she organized a few different reading groups. Right now she's doing a holiday reading blitz Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, and Christmas stories."

"Wow," Miles said, impressed. "She sounds like the complete opposite of me."

"She is," Gavin confirmed with an emphatic nod.

Miles gave him a dirty look then continued exploring the store. Gavin hung out near the front so he could keep an eye on the register.

"I remember the erotica section used to be here," Miles said as he made his way to the far corner of the store. He had to raise his voice for Gavin to hear him, and he objected.

"Say that a little louder, why don't you." As he said that, Gavin came over to join him. He was probably afraid of what else Miles might

shout to him if he didn't. "Your beloved erotica section is still there. It's just a little slimmed down and higher up." Gavin pointed to the top shelves, well out of reach of any little hands and possibly even out of reach of most short people.

"Slimmed down? You mean nonexistent." Miles noticed that all the books that were still there had fairly safe covers.

"Benji roams up and down these aisles, and there are some things I'm not ready to explain to him just yet, maybe ever," Gavin said with a sigh.

"Where did Benji come from? I'm pretty sure you didn't have a kid when I was working for you," Miles said. "I know I wasn't on top of things, but I think I would have noticed. Probably."

"I adopted him a little after you quit. Decided it was time."

"So you've only been a father for what, a year or less than two years anyway?" Miles estimated. "For a newbie, you're pretty good at it."

"Benji is a good kid. He makes it look easy," Gavin said with a smile.

"And you're a single dad?" Miles asked tentatively. He was afraid to hear the answer.

"Yes," Gavin said and gave him a baleful look, like he thought he was implying something about his ability to get a man.

Actually, Miles was thrilled to hear it. After Miles stopped working for him, he was sure that the next time he saw Gavin, he would be in a serious relationship, maybe even married. That was one reason he didn't stop by until now. It would have been too painful to see that.

The big change in Gavin's life was completely different from what he expected. Miles asked him about it. "What made you want to adopt?"

Gavin gave him a one word answer. "Books."

"Really?" Miles said, looking all around him at shelves full of books and trying to figure out how they might lead to having a kid.

Gavin smiled at his confusion. "I kept looking at the books in the kids' section and thinking to myself, 'I want to read this one to my kid some day.' When a new kids' book would come in, I would think the same thing, like I was making a reading list in my head. After I caught myself thinking the same thing about a dozen different times, always making plans for 'some day', I wondered, 'What am I waiting for?' So I decided not to wait and started the adoption process. It took a while, but then one day it happened. Benji was in foster care until then. Meeting him for the first time, I was falling apart at the seams. I was biting my lower lip so I wouldn't cry and scare the poor little guy," Gavin said with a chuckle but his eyes were tearing up.

"It must have been something," Miles said as he tried to imagine the moment when Benji and Gavin came together as father and son. He couldn't quite do it. He couldn't picture them as strangers meeting for the first time. To him it had seemed like they had always been father

and son. Miles looked at Gavin. "What was it like?"

"It was amazing and overwhelming. He was just there, this entire little person, my little boy. Real and tiny and a little scared. My kid. It was like a miracle happened right in front of my eyes." Gavin took a shaky breath. "Everything was so new then. Now I don't know what I would do without him. And speaking of Benji, I need to go get him from school pretty soon."

"Do you usually close to do that?" Miles asked since it looked like he was the only one working there right now.

"Only sometimes. Meredith is usually here around this time, but she had an appointment today."

"I can mind the store until you come back," Miles offered.

"All of a sudden you want to work here?" Gavin asked in disbelief.

"What? I wasn't that bad."

Gavin disagreed. "I remember you criticizing my customers' buying decisions and making inappropriate comments in general."

"Like when that lady was buying a Dr. Phil book?" Miles asked.

Gavin nodded. "Yes, and many, many other times just like it."

"I was being a good salesman, providing professional guidance. Anyone who would buy a Dr. Phil book obviously needed my services desperately."

Rather than argue with him, Gavin told him, "If you promise not to hassle the customers, you can watch the register until I come back."

"It's a deal. I'll mind the store, you bring that little dude over here."

Gavin shook his head at his enthusiasm then left.

Now Miles was looking around and thinking, "Like old times. Or maybe better."

Chapter 3

A little while later, Miles spotted Gavin out of the store windows. Next he heard the door chime and saw Benji running inside ahead of his dad. He came to stand right in front of the sales counter so that Miles had to lean over to see him.

"Dad said you are here. Hi, Miles."

"Hi to you too. How was school?" Miles asked him.

"It was good and I have lots of homework." Benji tapped his book bag as he took it off his shoulders.

Miles commiserated. "Life is tough for us students."

Benji nodded in agreement and went over to sit at the low, orange table in the kids' section. He started to unpack his book bag while his father came over to join Miles at the register. Miles noticed that the kids' table was in full view of the sales counter so Gavin would have no trouble keeping an eye on his kid from there.

"I see the store is still standing," Gavin said.

"Did you rush back to make sure? You should have more faith in me. I even sold some stuff. An art book, a calendar, and two suspense novels to a guy looking for something to read on the plane," Miles counted off.

"Two. Good work," Gavin said.

Hearing his dad praise Miles, Benji turned to them. "Does Miles work here now?" he asked. "I want to work here."

"He was just helping," Gavin told him.

"I want to be helping too," Benji said.

"First do your homework," his dad told him.

"You know while I'm here, I should pick up some Christmas gifts," Miles said.

He went to explore the different sections of the store, especially the ones that wouldn't usually interest him. After some poking around, he came back to the register with a small stack of books and showed them to Gavin.

"Check it out. A Christmas crafts book. My mom will go crazy for this. She goes Christmas crazy in general. Both my parents do. According to my dad, you don't have enough Christmas lights until you blow a fuse. As soon as Thanksgiving is over, it's like someone fired a starter pistol. My mom is decorating the house until it looks like Christmas exploded. And I swear, she starts baking Christmas cookies in August." As Miles talked about his parents, he got a little sad.

Benji's ears perked up at the mention of cookies. "Christmas cookies?"

"Yeah. I'll be getting some. I'll bring some over here, and I might even share them with you," Miles told him.

"I'll share mine too," Benji promised solemnly.

"What a generous boy you've raised," Miles said to Gavin, who smiled at his son proudly.

Miles left the books stacked on the counter and went to look at the kids' books. "I have a niece now, so I should get her something too."

"How old is she?" Gavin asked.

"She'll be turning one soon."

"Make sure it's a book she can chew on. That's what little kids do with them," Gavin advised him.

"I don't chew on books. I know how to read," Benji claimed.

Miles looked over at Gavin for confirmation. He mouthed, "Kind of."

With Benji at his side Miles looked through a few of the Christmas books though none of them looked chewable. *Snow Party* and *Ten on the Sled* caught his eye and Benji approved with a nod.

"That's a good one too," Benji told him when he picked up *Froggy Gets Dressed*. Then he whispered. "He forgets his underwear." Benji giggled.

"That happens to me sometimes," Miles said.

Gavin shot him a questioning look and Miles grinned at him.

Benji told him about the next book he looked at too, *Snowmen at Night*. "They have lots of fun but then they get tired."

"What's that one?" Miles asked about a book Benji held out to him.

"It's *The Biggest Snowman Ever*," Benji said and put his arms out. "I have that one in my book bag." Benji then went off to dig it out of his bag. He came back with *The Biggest Snowman Ever* and two other books.

"Look how many books you have. Should we read them?" Miles asked and Benji agreed.

The two of them sat down at the low table. Miles sat cross-legged on the floor while Benji took one of the footstools.

"Can you read by yourself or do you need help?" Miles asked him.

"I don't need help," Benji said.

"Then I'll read by myself. I'll read this one." Miles picked up one of the other books from Benji's collection. It was called *The Red Sled*.

"That will be quick. There's like five words in that book," Gavin said from behind the counter.

Benji disagreed. "There is more than five."

As Miles read next to him, Benji kept leaning over to look at what he was reading.

"Wow, you can read two books at the same time," Miles told him. "You want me to read it out loud?"

Benji nodded, accepting his offer. Sitting cross-legged and leaning

over so Benji could follow along, Miles read *The Red Sled*, making the most of the few words in the book, especially the sound effects.

After he was done reading it, he decided, "I think I'll get her this one. It's not chewable, but I think her parents will have fun reading it to her." He got a copy off the shelf and took it to the register.

That's when a redheaded lady came into the store, apologizing and carrying a takeout bag. "I'm sorry about my appointment. It was the only time they had, but I brought snacks. I got egg rolls. I was craving them. I admit it freely." She set the bag on the counter then greeted Benji as he came running over.

Benji pointed at Miles, who was paying for his purchases. "Meredith, look. It's Miles," he said to her.

"You made a friend?" she said to Benji who looked up at Miles as if to confirm his status.

"We're reading buddies," Miles said. "And you must be Meredith. I heard you took my old job and put me to shame."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. And that means you are the famous Miles I've heard so much about," she told him and shook his hand.

"I'm famous. I'm afraid to ask for what," Miles said.

"Nothing too bad," she told him with a wink, and Miles looked over at Gavin accusingly. He didn't even try to look innocent.

"OK. I'm off. It was nice to meet you, Meredith. Enjoy your egg rolls, guys. I'll see you soon," Miles said and headed for the door.

"Come back soon," Benji yelled after him.

Miles paused and turned to Gavin expectantly.

"Yes, please come back soon," Gavin said and gave him an ironically professional smile.

"You say that to everyone," Miles accused him. It was true. He remembered that he was forced to say some version of that when he worked there. Gavin said it about as enthusiastically as he used to, but Miles still planned to take him up on it. Not because it was a good idea to torture himself, but because he wouldn't be able to stay away.

*

Gavin didn't expect a visit from Miles so soon. He thought that maybe months from their accidental lunch together, Miles might remember that the bookstore existed and drop by when he found himself in the neighborhood and had nothing better to do. Miles had proven him wrong. Even so, Gavin certainly didn't expect him to stay as long as he did or to spend time reading with Benji.

While he surprised him a little, Miles didn't seem all that different from the way he used to be when he worked for Gavin. He could see him as he was in those days – his head bent over a book, ear buds in

his ears so that he didn't hear when Gavin asked him to do something. He let that boy get away with murder. But if he was being honest, Gavin really enjoyed having him around more than anyone else who ever worked for him, maybe more than anyone period.

Even if he wasn't the best employee, his saving grace in Gavin's eyes was the way he lost himself in a book. When Gavin did manage to get his attention, Miles would blink at him, his eyes unfocused for a moment, looking like someone who had just woken up.

Sometimes he would be reading and then laugh suddenly, the sound of it ringing through the quiet store. Gavin remembered how that startled him then made him smile. There was never any doubt that Miles liked to read. He would get absorbed in it and then talk about what he read like he was rushing to get the words out, all of them at once. Then he would stare at Gavin uncertainly, like it dawned on him that his words couldn't capture what he just read. Gavin knew the feeling. For some reason one set of words couldn't capture another.

That inexpressible magic found in the written word was why Gavin decided to buy the bookstore and try to make a success of it. Whether it was beauty or terror or something dry and scholarly, he had a thirst for the written word and decided to make it his life's work. But at the end of the day, it would have been nice to have someone to share it with and not only that little guy in the kid's section.

When Gavin tried to picture that someone, his mind got stuck on the image of Miles – laughter in his eyes, a smile on his full lips, a promise of warmth on his smooth skin and in his slim body. Gavin shook his head. That was only because he had just seen him. Miles couldn't be the one.

Chapter 4

Miles tried to swear off making himself a nuisance at the Bookworm, but that only lasted a few days. His morning class had been cancelled, and Miles considered that a sign that he should go visit Gavin at the bookstore. This early in the day, there wouldn't be too many shoppers. He might even get Gavin all to himself.

The streets were busy and Miles walked fast dodging and weaving down the sidewalks, not wanting to give up what little time he had to slow walking people and window shoppers. Once in front of the bookstore, he stopped to catch his breath. Now Miles was the one window shopping, but he wasn't interested in any merchandise. He only had eyes for Gavin.

Peering in through the store windows, his eyes searched for Gavin. He was easy to find, standing behind the counter, looking tall and gorgeous. Only one other person was inside the store and she was on her way out.

His focus shifted from Gavin behind the counter to his own reflection in the glass. Why couldn't he get his hair to behave? And he would bet anything that Gavin liked a more clean-shaven look. There was no way that unkempt and scruffy was his type. Running his hand through his hair, Miles sighed.

He started staring at Gavin again, so trim, neatly dressed, but mostly just plain gorgeous. Why was Miles doing this to himself? Since he had a taste of his company, he was fantasizing about Gavin constantly, wanting him hopelessly, visiting Gavin, now watching him like some kind of stalker. It wasn't smart and it couldn't end well.

Seeing that he had been spotted, Miles waved at him through the glass and Gavin waved him in.

"You looked busy. I didn't want to bother you," Miles said to make an excuse for lurking outside instead of just coming in like a normal person.

"Not too busy," Gavin said and greeted him with a cautious smile. "Doing more shopping?"

"Maybe I'm just visiting," Miles said only half willing to admit that he wanted to see Gavin again. He was sure that if he told him, Gavin would turn very stern and firmly inform him that there was no hope for the two of them. Miles already knew that, but it wasn't enough to keep him away.

Miles walked around the front of the store, checking out the shelves closest to the register. Running his finger over the book spines, he was remembering what it was like to work there surrounded by all these

books, breathing in that scent and getting to see Gavin practically every day. "I do miss this place."

"That's why you visit as often as you can," Gavin said sarcastically and came over to lean a hand on the shelf next to Miles.

"Aha! You missed me," Miles accused him, though he didn't believe it for a second. The whole time he tried not to stare at Gavin. If he locked eyes with him up close, he was sure to give himself away.

"Miss you? Where did you get that idea?" Gavin said defensively.

"From you," Miles said to him. "You just said you couldn't wait for me to come back and visit."

"Maybe you're here looking for more Christmas gifts," Gavin hinted, playing the salesman.

"Mainly I'm here for a hit of nostalgia. This place brings back memories."

"Of slacking off?"

"Mmm, yes. Some of the best slacking off of my young life. Plus I got to ogle you," Miles said, feeling brave all if a sudden. Or more likely suicidal. Standing so close to Gavin was scrambling his circuits.

"Ha. I don't believe that for a second," Gavin said, dismissing his claim. "If I remember correctly, you called me the lonely librarian type."

"Maybe I like librarian types," Miles said. He didn't tell him the rest. How he thought Gavin was oh so strict, so uptight, so fuckable. Or that he used to ogle his ass whenever he got the chance. Instead he turned to look around the store like he was a real shopper.

"Actually I might pick up some more gifts while I'm here. I've been struggling with Christmas shopping. I should get some nonfiction for my dad," Miles said so he would have an excuse to stay longer. He wished he could just admit he liked coming here.

His heart sank at the thought that he had to rein in his feelings. He liked these feelings. They lifted him up, made him fly and grin like a fool. He didn't want to give that up. Did he have a choice though?

No matter how much he told himself to give it up already, he felt such a strong pull back to this bookstore. Old memories and the warmth of the place, being with Gavin and now Benji too, it had all dragged him back here against his better judgment. He should stop coming back here. He should stop torturing himself.

"Are you really considering a book about unusual diseases as a holiday gift for someone?" Gavin asked from right behind him, startling him.

"Maybe I should get it for my brother-in-law. He's kind of a hypochondriac," Miles told him without turning around. Trying to give nothing away, he held his breath then let it out slowly to calm himself. He was too aware of how close Gavin was standing to dare to

look over his shoulder. If he turned around... What would happen? Only one way to find out, a rebellious voice inside him said. And then some rebellious part of his body followed through.

Against his better judgment, Miles was turning to face Gavin. Then he was leaning in, imperceptibly at first until only a single breath separated him from Gavin. Now Miles had no choice but to take this the rest of the way. He looked past Gavin's blue eyes, past the dark stubble on his sharply sculpted jaw line, and focused on the red of his slightly parted lips.

Miles grabbed his shoulders and pressed his mouth to Gavin's too hard like he was being driven by demons and not desire. Reeling from that kiss, he staggered against Gavin and clutched at him hard like he wanted to dig his fingers through his flesh. He needed him so much and any second Gavin would push him away. Miles knew he would. He braced himself for it, but when it didn't happen, Miles gave himself up to that kiss. But it wasn't just him. Gavin shifted closer, chest to chest with him, thighs and hips pressed together. Fingers tangled through Miles' hair, Gavin kissed him deeper.

God knows how long they would have kissed frantically, pushing against each other, if the door chime didn't sound followed by two voices in mid conversation. Gavin and Miles pulled apart but not very far. They stood with the toes of their shoes almost touching. They were out of sight for now, and at first they didn't move. Miles for one was frozen, not even breathing.

His stomach in knots, he stared down at his feet, afraid to raise his eyes to Gavin's face, afraid of what he would see there if he dared to look. He knew what would happen next. Gavin would reject him, tell him it was a bad idea, a mistake.

Miles had always known that. It was the whole reason he couldn't keep working for him. Now he was going to be proven right. His heart was about to get crushed. The pain was already blooming inside him. He had stopped breathing and he didn't know how to start, and Gavin noticed.

"Are you holding your breath?" Gavin asked him. He touched Miles elbows lightly. "Come on, breathe," he ordered him.

"Only if you promise that wasn't the last time I'm ever going to kiss you," Miles blackmailed him.

There was a pause during which Miles felt himself sinking into the darkest oblivion. "We'll see," Gavin finally said pulling him out of it.

Miles eyed him uncertainly. "That wasn't exactly a rejection, was it?" he asked to make sure he heard him right.

"Not exactly," Gavin confirmed but he seemed uneasy, so Miles knew he better not push his luck any more than he already did.

"I was sure you were going to reject me," he admitted.

Gavin responded with an admission of his own. "I couldn't. You looked so scared."

"That happens when you want something too much."

"So you weren't just messing around when you kissed me?" Gavin said, eyeing him sharply.

"With you, I wouldn't dare," Miles told him seriously. "I was ready for rejection, now I don't know what to do."

"Don't get carried away. That's one thing you can do," Gavin warned him.

Miles nodded. It was all he could do at that moment. He took a few deep breaths then his eyes fell on the donation box for kids' holiday gifts. It was already half full of children's books.

"I'll get something for that box while I'm at it," Miles said. It gave him a chance to keep busy, not make a fool of himself by tackling Gavin to the floor, and it was for a good cause. OK. He had a plan for the next few minutes. But he had no idea what he was going to do with himself after that, other than be late for class. Gavin had made him forget all about that. How the hell was he supposed to not get carried away?

Chapter 5

Setting out first thing in the morning, Benji was all bundled up and had on his striped red and white knit cap, which they had nicknamed the candy cane hat. Gavin carried Benji's book bag and held his hand. They were on their way to Benji's kindergarten. The morning air was cold and damp, still a little foggy. Stopped at the crosswalk, Gavin didn't start walking when the light turned green and Benji tugged at his hand to get him to move.

After a restless night spent thinking about Miles and that crazy kiss, Gavin was a little unfocused. He remembered that it wasn't this hard to keep his mind off Miles when he used to work for him. Just reminding himself that Miles was barely eighteen was enough to keep his attraction at bay. He made sure never to lose his composure around him, to stay cool and professional, not to look at him for too long, not to admire him. If he caught himself fantasizing about him, he snapped out of it lightning fast.

That was then. Last night Gavin hardly slept. He was consumed by that kiss and what might have happened if they had been somewhere more private instead of in the middle of the store, hidden only by some shelves. In his fantasies, he took Miles against those shelves, on the floor, and in the very bed where Gavin was jerking off.

He imagined that somehow Miles had sneaked into his bedroom in the middle of the night. Already naked, he had climbed on top of him. He rode Gavin until he came. Even after that, Gavin wasn't able to sleep. He wanted Miles to still be there so he could reach for his unruly hair and kiss his luscious mouth. His mind refused to rest until the night turned to dawn.

Gavin woke up feeling tired and vaguely guilty. He shouldn't feel guilty for wanting Miles, but he couldn't give into it either. He couldn't think only of his own needs. He was a father now. He had to think about what was best for Benji.

Benji was usually more shy and standoffish with new people, but he warmed to Miles right away. That should have been a good thing. With both father and son giving him the thumbs up, Miles should be a shoe-in. But it wouldn't be good for Benji to get attached to a guy who wasn't going to stick around.

His gaze finally resting on Benji by his side, Gavin smiled. He was counting how many taxis passed by while they waited to cross the street at yet another crosswalk. As the light turned green, Benji turned up his face to Gavin and reported that he counted four taxis, but only two were yellow. Looking at his little boy, his sweet face and curious eyes, quieted Gavin's turmoil like nothing else could. Benji was happy.

He was doing so well. The crisis was only in his own heart.

After he dropped off Benji at kindergarten, Gavin headed for the bookstore while fantasizing about Miles the whole way. This time of the year the sidewalks were more crowded than usual, and he noticed a few people waiting outside stores that hadn't opened yet. That made him think of his own store, which was doing well especially with all the holiday shoppers dropping in.

Gavin couldn't keep his mind on business for long though. Thinking about the bookstore meant thinking about Miles and how he had kissed him. It hadn't been exactly a shock since Gavin had lingered near him when he had other things he should have been doing. He as much as invited that kiss, so he had no right to regret it. Not that he did. He questioned it, relived it, took it a step further even.

Preoccupied with Miles, Gavin didn't notice that the lady who was about to cut across his path was actually wheeling a stroller in front of her. He veered away from them too quickly and stepped on the edge of the curb clumsily, twisting his ankle. As he bit back a curse and his face contorted, the woman and her little girl both looked at him with concern.

"I'm OK," Gavin lied.

The little girl pouted at him like she knew he was lying, and he limped away with his ankle hurting more with every step he took.

Taking stock of where he was, Gavin realized he was closer to his apartment than to the bookstore and decided to go and get his car. Since parking was such a nightmare, especially this time of the year, he usually walked most places. Now the car was a better way to get himself to the bookstore without further injury.

Luckily, he managed to drive himself there in time to open the store at the usual hour. Hobbling past the sales counter into the back room, he turned up the thermostat on the way. He fetched the barstool so he could sit at the counter and work the register without being on his feet the whole time.

The barstool had been gathering dust in the corner of the back room since the days when Miles worked there. Gavin liked to stand, or as Miles called it, stand at attention. And Meredith didn't stand still at all. Always tireless, she busied herself all around the store. Being her perfect opposite, Miles was the only one who liked to use the barstool as he perched himself at the counter with his nose buried in a book. Gavin smiled fondly at the memory and sat down at the counter.

It wasn't long after opening the store that Gavin spotted the reason for his injury coming up the sidewalk. The door swung open and the chime sounded. Flushed and breathing hard, Miles rushed in as if a

gust of cold wind had carried him there.

"I ran here and I hardly slept a wink, so don't throw me out," Miles said all in one breath. Then he added, "And don't throw me away either." He made it sound like a demand but his lower lip trembled and that almost broke Gavin's heart.

"Relax," Gavin told him. "No one is getting thrown anywhere." He was tempted to tell him that he had trouble sleeping as well, but he didn't think that it was a good idea to encourage him too much.

"Sorry. I know I wasn't supposed to get carried away. But ever since I ran into you guys at Vic's Diner, I tried not coming by at all. That didn't work. I tried not coming here so much. That didn't work either," Miles rambled while taking off his jacket like he was already getting hot.

Gavin went over to check the thermostat to make sure he hadn't turned it up too much when he came in. He didn't want customers leaving the store because they found it too warm in there. Unfortunately, Miles had distracted him and he forgot that his ankle was still hurting. He put too much weight on it and winced.

Miles noticed he was in pain and frowned with concern. "Hey, you're hurt. Should you be walking around? Should you be on crutches?"

"It's just my ankle. I twisted it a little. Nothing major," Gavin assured him.

"How did you do this to yourself?" Miles asked.

Gavin nearly told him that it happened because he was thinking about him. He didn't though. "I was walking Benji to school and stepped wrong on the edge of a curb. It's not a big deal."

"What are you going to do with your ankle like that?"

"Limp. Hobble. That sort of thing," Gavin told him. He didn't have much choice about that until Meredith came in.

Miles didn't like his plan. "How about rest? How about get off your feet? If you need help, I can pitch in," Miles offered. "I do know my way around the place."

The offer surprised Gavin. "Are you asking for your old job back?"

"Are you hiring?"

"Not at the moment."

"Let me help out. I'll even work for free," Miles said. He was really determined.

It was tempting but Gavin was uneasy about it. "I don't want to lean on you," he admitted to Miles.

"Oh, come on. Lean!" Miles urged him.

"If I do, it might become a habit."

"That's what I'm counting on," Miles said with a grin.

Gavin grumbled but then he relented. "OK. I do need to rest this ankle so it can heal."

Miles was happy to hear it. "I'm on it. So I should shelve these?" he asked seeing a box of new arrivals behind the counter. "But first let's get you somewhere more comfortable."

"I'm only letting you help. I didn't put you in charge," Gavin pointed out when Miles came around and took him by the arm.

Miles wasn't discouraged though. He put Gavin's arm over his shoulder and led him into the back.

"Look at you limping," he said then walked him over to the couch. "This is where I want you. In more ways than one." Miles mumbled that last part, but Gavin was close enough to hear him clearly.

Gavin eyed him but Miles only shrugged innocently.

As he eased himself onto the couch with Miles' help, Gavin groaned. "I can't believe I did this to myself."

"Aren't you supposed to keep it up to ease the swelling?" Miles asked. He looked around then took hold of the back of the office chair from Gavin's desk and wheeled it over. Being careful not to hurt him, he raised Gavin's leg up to rest on it. "Is that OK?"

"It's fine. Thanks."

Miles saluted him and went off. Keeping an eye on the doorway into the front of the store, Gavin could see him moving around, working diligently. There was no denying that Gavin had misjudged him. The way Miles supported his calf as he raised his foot, the intent look in his eyes when he was making sure Gavin wasn't in pain, those were all new sides to him. It was hard to dismiss him when he was being so caring and good. Gavin had always been afraid of this very thing, that one day Miles would show him his other side and he would be defenseless against him.

Gavin took out his phone so he could at least answer some emails while he was sitting there. As he heard Miles crack his knuckles, he turned but couldn't see him. He remembered that sound so well. Miles would crack one hand then the other and finish by threading his long fingers together then push out for one final snap. It was kind of unnerving though Gavin knew it didn't hurt.

Gavin pictured it perfectly as he listened, and at the end he smiled. It was weird how fond he was of all sorts of weird things because they had to do with Miles. The cracking of his knuckles, the way he got distracted when he was supposed to be organizing the shelves and started reading something that caught his eye, even that beat up leather jacket he wore which he had hung over the arm of the couch when he helped Gavin to recline there. Gavin moved over so that he could prop up his calf on the other armrest. Now he could lean his face against Miles' jacket, close his eyes and breathe in Miles' scent. He felt shameless doing that, but he couldn't resist.

Chapter 6

Helping out at the bookstore was like the old days, except now Gavin knew that Miles was into him. Whenever things slowed down, he went into the back to check on Gavin. Realizing Benji would need to be picked up soon, Miles went to the back again. He found that Gavin had shifted so his injured leg was up on the armrest of the couch and his head leaned on Miles' jacket.

"A few people are strictly browsing out there, but it's quiet otherwise. You have anything for me to do back here?" Miles asked.

Gavin pointed out some books that were packed and ready to go. "Those need to be shipped. I was going to do that..."

"I'm on it. I can take them to the post office. I can do that when it's time to go pick up Benji from school. Would it be OK if I went to get him? How would that work anyway? Do you call the school or what?" Miles asked the string of questions while Gavin smiled at him.

"Are you sure you don't mind going?"

"Of course not. That little guy is fun," Miles said.

"OK. I'll call and authorize you. And while you're gone, I'll sit at the counter and mind the store," Gavin said and dialed Benji's school.

"Isn't Meredith coming?" Miles wondered.

"A little later. She's taking her reading group of retirees to visit a children's hospital, give out some gifts, and read to the kids."

"Sounds nice."

Gavin arranged for Miles to be put on the list of people who were allowed to pick up Benji. Since he was going to the post office too, Miles decided he better get going. He reached out to get his jacket and Gavin moved to free it up. Miles noticed how close they were as he leaned over him.

The temptation was so strong. For Miles, that one kiss wasn't nearly enough. It was just a taste, an unfulfilled promise. He wanted more, so much more than a fleeting, unexpected kiss. He needed tangible proof that he could feel right down to his bones.

With the silence between them thick enough to slice, Miles reached out and took Gavin's hand in his. Chest heaving while he clutched Gavin's hand, Miles sat down next to him on the couch. He was lost in his blue eyes, like he might fall into them. Miles said his name softly, but that was all he could say.

Clasping Gavin's hand against his chest so that he could feel the crazy beating of his heart, Miles tried to let him know what he was feeling. In response, Gavin squeezed his hand hard and pulled him closer. His arms tightened around Miles, bringing him to lean against Gavin's chest, feeling every breath he took like it was his own. It felt

good especially since a kiss was inevitable. Then it happened. Gavin brought his hand up to rest on the back of Miles' head. Guiding him closer, he touched his lips to Miles'.

Their first kiss was sudden, an outburst of raw need. This kiss was tentative at first then deep and tender, like it had no end. Miles' hand tightly grasped in his, Gavin was gliding his tongue over his, making the nerve endings tingle over his whole body while sparks were going off behind his eyes. They heard some customers in front and pulled away from each other slowly.

Head down, Miles was afraid to move. Then Gavin pushed the hair out of his face, and Miles looked at him. He landed a quick kiss on Gavin's lips then stood up.

"I better go get Benji. I'll tell him not to yell at you too much for being clumsy and getting hurt, but no promises. Behave yourself while I'm gone," Miles said all in a rush, still breathless from the kiss and then he was out of there.

It was only while he was half way between the post office and Benji's school that Miles' brain started functioning again. That's when he remembered that he should have helped Gavin get to the register before he left. Of course Gavin did get himself there without his help before. Kissing Gavin just felt too crazy good. After wanting him for so long, it felt unreal. But it had happened twice now and Gavin hadn't shut him down.

Miles was still smiling even when he picked up Benji, who seemed happy to see him. That is until he told him that Gavin hurt himself a little bit.

"But, Miles, why are you smiling?" Benji asked.

"Oh. Umm," Miles stammered until he figured out how to explain himself. "Before I came to get you, your dad and I were having fun. That's why I was smiling."

"So it's not bad?" Benji asked.

"No, not at all. But it does mean that you get to help at the store today," Miles told him.

"Yey!" Benji said.

"But you'll need to do your homework first," Miles remembered to say. "And we should pick up some sandwiches. That will help your dad get better fast."

When they got to the store, Gavin was busy unpacking a new delivery. He was sitting behind the counter but had switched from the bar stool to the office chair. He stopped what he was doing to greet Benji and Miles. Then Miles took over unpacking the new books so Gavin could reassure Benji that he was OK.

Carrying a takeout bag with sandwiches, Benji went over to Gavin with a mixture of worry and excitement. "I get to help today," Benji said after he hugged his dad.

"You have to do your homework first," Gavin told him, predictably.

"Miles already told me that," Benji whined and gave his dad the takeout bag with a huff.

"You have a lot of books coming in," Miles said as he stashed the empty box in the back. He was trying to keep busy and not to stare at Gavin or reveal how he felt being around him after that kiss.

"I did some last minute reordering when we started running out of a few titles that are popular right now. I don't want to miss out on the holiday sales," Gavin explained.

"I'll shelve them after we eat," Miles told him. It was weird to go back to strictly business after that kiss, but Miles was doing his best not to dwell on any vivid memories of just how Gavin tasted or how hard his muscular arms felt when he held him so tight. Damn, so much for not dwelling. Now his heart was racing.

"You don't have to do that. You did enough. I can wheel myself around on this office chair," Gavin started to say.

"Or you can sit still at the register and stay out of trouble," Miles told him sternly, turning practical after losing his head for a minute there. "If you go scooting around on that chair, you'll bump your foot into something and then where will you be? Benji and I can handle things out here. Right Benji?"

Benji agreed. "Yes. No scooting, Dad."

Seeing that they were united against him, Gavin gave up and stayed put. "OK. No scooting."

After lunch, it was Benji's homework time. When he was done with it, he brought his homework over to his dad to check. He approved and now Benji was free to help out. Miles was almost finished with the new books though. Benji handed the last few to Miles then he pouted with disappointment that they were done.

"I'm sure there's more we can do," Miles said to him and they went over to ask Gavin for more work. "So what now, boss man, what do we do?"

"Yeah, boss man, what do we do?" Banji echoed.

"That's boss Dad to you," Miles told him.

"Someone messed up the travel section, you can straighten it up a little," Gavin told them, smiling at Benji's eagerness. For a moment his blue eyes flashed on Miles then he turned away and busied himself with his laptop. Good thing or Miles would have to hold his breath forever.

Soon after that, Meredith arrived. "Why didn't you call me to come in?" she asked Gavin when he told her about his foot.

"And disappoint the kids at the hospital? I don't think so. I had Miles here and Benji to help me," he said, and Benji looked so proud of himself.

"Look at that. He loves helping his dad," Meredith said and made him blush.

"OK then, I'm quitting for the day," Miles said, seeing that the place was fully staffed now.

"You don't work for me," Gavin said. Then he added, "Which is why I appreciate what you did today. Thank you."

"It's no problem. I had fun. How about you Benji?" Miles asked.

"Me too," he agreed.

Miles was putting on his jacket when Meredith motioned for him to wait.

"You should get off that foot and put some ice on it," she told Gavin. "I'm here now so I can take care of things. You go home." She turned to Miles. "Can you drive them home?"

"I drove myself here. I can drive..." Gavin started to say but Miles interrupted.

"I can drive them home, no problem."

"It's a plan," Meredith said with a pleased smile and clapped her hands together.

"Why is everyone making decisions for me? I'm the boss," Gavin objected though it was clear that the matter was settled.

"Right now you're the patient. Get better soon," Meredith told him.

Chapter 7

Gavin let himself be hustled to his car grudgingly. Miles had one of his arms over his shoulder while Benji held his hand. Then Benji made sure his dad was buckled in properly. That left Miles to secure Benji in his car seat. He managed it somehow.

From the bookstore, it was a quick drive to Gavin's apartment building. It was a squat older building with a wide set of stairs that led to an arched doorway. Miles helped Gavin limp up those stairs and into the elevator then from the elevator to his apartment door.

"You're coming in, right?" Gavin said when Miles hesitated on the threshold.

Benji grabbed his hand just in case Miles was thinking of running off. "This is our apartment!" Benji announced once they were inside. He seemed very proud of it, and no wonder since it was probably his first real home after foster care.

Miles looked around appreciatively. There were plenty of books everywhere he looked, on big bookshelves and small ones. A leather armchair stood under a tall lamp in the corner. A comfy looking couch faced a decent size TV.

Of course Miles looked around for Gavin's bedroom. As far as he was concerned, his bedroom door might as well have a target painted on it. Trying to distract Miles from his one, true goal, Gavin drew his attention to the modest eat-in kitchen and the tiny sliver of a balcony with a lovely view of the brick wall of the neighboring building. That wall seemed close enough to touch.

"In the summer we sit out there. We have barbeques," Gavin joked while pointing at that poor excuse for a balcony and leaning on the back of a chair for support.

"Barbeques? When?" Benji asked as if he thought Gavin might have been having barbeques behind his back.

"I was just kidding," Gavin told him and ruffled his hair, but Benji was still taking this barbeque issue very seriously.

"We can have barbeques," Benji insisted while smoothing his hair back in place.

"Sure, if we get the world's tiniest grill," Gavin told him as he settled himself on the couch.

"Speaking of food. What are you doing about dinner?" Miles asked and looked down at his ankle as Gavin propped it up on the coffee table.

"I'll throw something together," Gavin said with a grimace.

"A pizza. The man at Angelo's throws the pizza," Benji said.

"There's a guy over there who puts on quite a show. Do you want to

stay and eat with us? It won't be anything major," Gavin said to Miles.

Benji voted "Yes" and nodded at Miles to urge him to agree.

"Sure. I'd like that. Thanks, you guys," Miles said.

"Can we have pizza?" Benji asked.

"We need to have something healthy," Gavin told him.

"But Miles wants pizza too," Benji said and gave him a pleading look.

"Actually I was thinking that you and I can make something together while your dad rests his ankle," Miles told him.

"Pizza?" Benji said.

"Do you know how to make a pizza?" Miles asked him while he opened Gavin's freezer and got some ice so he could make an ice pack for his ankle.

"You throw it," Benji said.

"You'll have to show me one of these days. But I was thinking we might make an ice pack for your dad first then a salad or something. And I'm going to need lots of help so get ready to tell me where you keep everything," Miles told him.

"OK," Benji agreed.

After they had Gavin's ankle on ice, Benji noticed a few drops of water where some of the ice had melted on the kitchen counter.

"Better clean it," Benji told Miles.

"It's just water," Miles said but Benji wasn't happy until it was wiped up.

As they got dinner together, Benji insisted that every crumb had to be chased down right away. No wonder the kitchen was so clean. They made a salad with strips of carrots and served it with hummus on toasted pita bread triangles.

Seeing it all set up in the middle of the kitchen table, Miles praised Benji for his hard work. "You make a mean dinner."

"Mean?" Benji said as they all took their seats at the kitchen table.

"Mean means nice," Miles told him with a grin.

Benji shook his head and stared at Miles like he thought he might need to be held back a grade or two. Miles laughed.

"I never knew little kids were so much fun," Miles said.

"What about your niece?" Gavin asked him.

"My sis and her family live in Philly. I don't see them that much."

"You'll see them for Christmas, right?" Gavin said.

"Maybe," Miles said noncommittally.

Gavin gave him a questioning look but didn't press him about it. Miles was glad he didn't have to answer any questions about the situation with his family. It made holidays hard, but he tried not to dwell on it, especially while he was having such a good time with Gavin and Benji. They reminded him of what family dinners were supposed to be like – only love served up at the dinner table, no

bigotry.

After dinner, Miles thought he would be going home, but Benji had other plans. As soon as he was done helping to put away dinner dishes, he took Miles by the hand. "Now we watch TV," Benji announced and led him to the couch.

Miles glanced at Gavin to make sure it was OK. He was already sitting down with his foot up. He patted the couch next to him and Benji climbed to sit beside him. Miles took it as a signal that he should join them as well.

"I can help you watch some TV I guess since you helped out with dinner," Miles told Benji and took a seat. Turning to look over his head at Gavin, he smiled. "I'm not holding you hostage, am I?" Miles asked him. He didn't want to take advantage of Gavin's weakened condition.

"I think you're the hostage," Gavin told him and pointed at the cartoon that was starting to play on the TV screen.

Miles disagreed. "Nope. I'm having a great time."

Hearing this, Benji turned to him. "You're our buddy, right?"

"Yup. That's me."

Benji smiled shyly and ducked his head. Seeing him like that, Gavin smoothed his hair and looked at his son with love. Even with his injured ankle, he seemed more at ease than Miles had ever seen him, just a happy dad spending quality time with his son. And also some random, pushy guy who just happen to horn in on their fun.

TV time was over too soon for Benji's liking. "Let's watch something else," he said when Gavin turned the TV off at the end of the second show they watched. "Miles wants to watch something else too, don’t you?" Benji said, trying to enlist his help.

"Do you know what time it is?" Gavin hinted as he got up off the couch with a grunt.

"No," Benji said. He put on a stubborn face and made no attempt to look at the clock.

"Ignorance is no excuse. You still have to go to bed now," Gavin told him.

"What about Miles?" Benji asked and took Miles' hand like he would anchor himself to him.

"He doesn't have to go to bed," Gavin told him.

"But he's here and I'm not sleepy," Benji claimed.

"Sorry. You can't stay up past your bedtime. You have school tomorrow," Gavin told him and offered him his hand so he could lead him to his bedroom to get ready for bed.

As he let go of Miles' hand, Benji yawned then covered his mouth

guiltily.

"Yeah, you gave yourself away there, little dude," Miles told him.

Benji still insisted, "I'm not sleepy. That was an accident."

Gavin and Miles both laughed but that didn't save Benji from having to go and get ready for bed. Before he took Benji away, Gavin looked over his shoulder at Miles. "You can stick around if you like," he said and watched a smile light up Miles' face.

Miles was thrilled to be invited to stay though he tried to tell himself not to get ahead of himself. While he waited, he walked around the living room to stretch his legs. Looking at the humongous bookshelf, a picture of Gavin and Benji caught his eye. Gavin was holding Benji, who looked kind of shy and had pulled in close to his dad. He looked younger there and Miles wondered if the photo was taken soon after Gavin adopted him.

He got his chance to find out when Gavin limped back into the living room and sat down again with his foot propped up on the coffee table.

"Was that picture taken right after you got Benji?" Miles asked as he sat down next to him.

"It was," Gavin said and looked over at the picture with a fond smile. "He was very apprehensive then. He got nervous whenever he was away from me. He always seemed worried that I wasn't coming back. I think he was still getting used to the fact that I was his dad now and forever and that I wasn't going anywhere. When he first started at his new preschool, I was worried, but with all the other kids there, he got into it pretty quickly."

"Having a dad like you has made him brave," Miles said. "But why was he so worried about spilling?" He had noticed how careful Benji was with his glass of milk. He also warned Miles not to pour too much because he didn't want to spill it.

"He had foster parents who were strict about making any kind of mess," Gavin explained. "They overdid it, so he's a little bit paranoid."

"He is tidier than most kids. I thought it just came naturally to him. When we were making dinner, every time there was a crumb or anything, he wanted me to wipe it up right away." At the time, Miles thought it was kind of funny.

"They drilled it into him, and I've been trying to undo the damage. It's not like I want him to be careless, but I don't want him to be scared to mess up."

"I'll teach him how to mess up," Miles offered. "I'm practically a pro at it."

"And what about your family? You always look kind of sad when you talk about them. Is something wrong?" Gavin asked.

Miles sighed and leaned back into the cushions of the couch. He

liked to pretend that everything was OK, but he must not have been doing a very good job of it. "It's not really the whole family. It's my grandfather. Ever since I came out when I was still in high school, he never misses a chance to tell me what he thinks of gay people." Miles gritted his teeth thinking back on his vile worlds. His grandfather had been fond of him before he found out he was gay, but then he turned hateful. He became like a different man with mean eyes and disgust on his face any time he looked at Miles.

"I'm sorry. I hope you didn't let him get to you," Gavin said and touched his hand lightly.

With Gavin's hand resting on his, Miles felt better already. "The worst of it happened the summer right before I started college and went to work for you. You were kind of my role model back then. I always knew my grandfather was full of crap, but it helped me to see you. You were like an antidote to all that poison. You were proof that being gay was a good thing. That we weren't depraved, sick degenerates."

"I'm too boring to be a degenerate."

"Exactly," Miles said with a laugh. "After listening to my grandfather spewing all that ignorant garbage, I needed to spend time with someone like you so I would know I was OK. There was nothing wrong with me. I wasn't sick. He was always telling my parents to send me to therapy so I could get fixed."

Hearing that, Gavin had a grim look on his face. "Your parents should have shut him down."

Miles shook his head. He knew that wasn't in the cards. "The whole family is under his thumb. My grandfather bullies them and they knuckle down. Plus he has had a lot of heart problems, and they don't want to upset him."

"And what about upsetting you?" Gavin asked pointedly.

"Me? I have to understand, he's from a different generation. That's just how he was raised." Miles let bitterness creep into his voice as he repeated what his parents had been telling him for as long as he could remember. "So I have to understand where he's coming from, but I shouldn't expect him to understand me. And I don't want him to have another heart attack, do I?" Miles took a deep breath then let it out in a sigh and told Gavin, "Sorry."

"No. Don't apologize. They are in the wrong, not you," Gavin said firmly. "You have a right to feel the way you do. Your grandfather doesn't." Then Gavin grew thoughtful. "The way you were talking about your family when you were buying gifts, I thought you had a good relationship with them."

"I just want to stay positive and hopeful. I guess I don't want to write them off. It would be too hard," Miles said, not sure how to explain his

mixed up feelings about his family.

"There's that sad look I noticed," Gavin said and smiled at him.

"Don't worry about me. Worry about your ankle," Miles told him, not wanting to let the subject of his family monopolize the conversation any longer. "Need any help getting into bed?" he asked boldly.

Gavin chuckled and refused his help. He did smile at Miles warmly, and there was no sign that he was warning him off. Hopefully that wasn't only because he felt sorry for him. Miles decided not to push his luck and got up, grabbed his jacket, ready to get going.

"I won't walk you to the door," Gavin told him.

"Of course not. But thanks for having me for dinner," Miles said.

"What are you talking about? You made the dinner," Gavin reminded him.

"Still, it means a lot to me. I'll see you soon," Miles told him and gave him a significant look. "But know that I won't be on my best behavior next time." Miles' eyes went from Gavin to his bedroom door, and he grinned. Then he got out of there before Gavin could say anything to discourage him.

Getting home, Miles went straight to his bedroom and tried to toe off his shoes with the laces still tied. After a pointless struggle and almost falling over, he had to sit on his bed to untie his shoelaces. He kicked his shoes away to tumble across his bedroom floor and land in the corner.

Without getting undressed, he dropped into the bed and sighed. He had only taken his jacket off. Through his remaining clothes he could feel the cold sheets and the empty bed. He wanted to be with Gavin again, sit close to him and maybe do more than talk this time. The cold sheets were making him shiver. What he wouldn't give to have Gavin in this bed with him.

As he closed his eyes on that fantasy, he thought it was only for a minute, but then without meaning to, he fell asleep in his clothes. The next day he woke up to a bright winter morning, chilled but still smiling, thinking of the next time he would see Gavin.

Chapter 8

Waking up to the sound of Benji puttering around the apartment, Gavin sat up then stopped himself. After a few days of getting up too suddenly and being reminded that his ankle still hurt, he took it easy. Now it was mostly healed though, and he could put weight on it without a jolt of pain.

He went out into the living room and found Benji crouching in front of the corner table. Gavin had cleared it and told him they would put their Christmas tree there. The way Benji was staring, it was almost like he thought the tree was going to magically appear.

"We'll go shopping for a tree soon," Gavin told him and went over to kiss the top of his head. "Now let's have some breakfast."

"Special Sunday breakfast, Dad," Benji reminded him.

"Is it Sunday?" Gavin asked to tease him.

"Yes. Special Sunday breakfast," Benji said and bounced excitedly.

Gavin had started the tradition when he first adopted Benji. He broke an egg in a hot pan and turned the yolk into a smile. Benji was delighted, so he did it with toast too. He spread peanut butter then squeezed grape jelly on it in the shape of a smile. Then he told Benji, "Sundays are for smiling. We're having a happy breakfast."

When he came up with the menu, he didn't know he would be stuck with it forever. Gavin planned to vary the special breakfast with pancakes, waffles, and a few other things, but Benji wouldn't hear of it. He also didn't expect Benji to insist that Gavin had to have the same thing. He went easy with the grape jelly on his own toast, but it was still a struggle. He drank plenty of black coffee with it to kill the sweetness. It was worth it though because it made Benji happy.

That was just one of the small ways his life had changed. He remembered how his place used to be – every available space taken up by books old and new. To make room for all the shelves, the rest of his furnishings was minimal. Books were at the center of his working life and his home. More than one person had called it an obsession.

Now the books were still there, but they were more in the background. Benji's stuff was front and center. What mattered to him, mattered to Gavin more than anything. Benji was his life.

That didn't mean that he didn't miss having a man to share his life with. He just tried not to brood about it. Getting to be a dad and running the bookstore, he was sometimes so busy he forgot that there was even anything else to want. Loneliness came on at night. That's when he could almost feel a man's body next to his own, hear him breathing, like he could touch him if he just reached out his hand. At those times Gavin kept his eyes shut and he didn't dare move. The

man was an illusion. If he tried to make him real, he would be gone.

And now there was Miles, this new, unexpected temptation. He wasn't an illusion. Miles was a promise of a real body next to his, if only for a little while. He just couldn't imagine that Miles would want to be with him forever.

The last few days had been nice though. Miles came by to help at the store as often as he could, and the feeling of being taken care of that he gave Gavin couldn't be beat. It was funny how Miles was always ready to pitch in, and he never seemed to like working at the bookstore when he actually got paid for it.

Though Miles didn't seem like he had one serious bone in his body, he knew how to focus on Benji and help him when he needed him. He and Benji had become homework buddies, which meant that Miles couldn't slack off. Every minute he spent with them reminded Gavin how nice it was to have him around. And also unnerving. Fighting his attraction to Miles was harder than ever.

But when he wasn't around, Gavin couldn't stop thinking about him. Once he got to the store, he had to force himself not to look toward the door every second. He couldn't deny that he was hoping to see Miles coming in then stopping just inside the door to give Gavin a cautious smile. It was like he was always asking if it was OK for him to be there. It was more than OK, but Gavin didn't dare tell him that.

"Are you expecting my predecessor again today?" Meredith asked seeing him glance toward the door one more time. It seemed like she could read him a little too well. He would have to watch himself.

"Not really." Miles hadn't been around as much since Gavin could stay on his feet without too much trouble. Gavin didn't expect his visits to continue indefinitely anyway. He was bound to lose interest. "It's only a matter of time before he gets bored."

Meredith frowned at him. "I don't think you do him justice. He's a really nice young man and very thoughtful," she said.

"Too young," Gavin mumbled. Maybe Miles had matured since the days he worked for him. It was only fair to give him credit. Gavin didn't doubt that he was a good guy with the best intentions. He just wasn't sure that was enough. And anyway, just because Miles wanted to hang out and fool around, that didn't mean that he wanted to get serious.

Gavin looked over at Benji. Meredith was taking him with her to see a move with her nieces' kids and then to lunch. Benji was excited to go, but Gavin's mind kept straying to Miles. Would he come by today?

*

It was Sunday. Miles was free to roam but there was only one place he wanted to be. But first he was going to Triple J's to have breakfast with his best friend. Her name was Candice and calling her Candy was a good way to get on her bad side. Miles had tried it for the first and last time when he wanted to sweet-talk her, and it backfired completely. According to her, Candy was a stripper name. Now Miles used it only when he wanted to get a rise out of her.

She was working on her masters but in no way was she the average college girl. When he first met her, Miles had asked her, "Are you a part time model or something?"

She was offended. "Why part time exactly?" But it turned out she wasn't a model at all. She just always looked like she was ready to walk down a runway.

Her model-worthy looks came at a price though. When he ate with her, Miles wasn't allowed to order anything good. If he did, she spent the whole meal glaring at him and stabbing at her salad viciously. That's why they both had fat free yogurt parfaits today though Miles' came with all sorts of yummy, crunchy toppings.

He was telling Candice his worries about Gavin. "What if I make the wrong move? At best, right now I might have a slim chance. One screw up and I'll lose any chance I have," Miles told her while munching on the cocoa dusted pecan pieces that topped his yogurt.

"If you want to have a shot at this guy, give it your all. They don't give medals for holding back," she told him.

"I'm the low achiever type, and you're telling me to go for the gold?"

"Your attitude stinks. You need a winning attitude, not aim for the honorable mention attitude," she told him.

"If I put my mind to it, you think I can win him over?" Miles asked uncertainly. He was afraid he was being too pushy and she was telling him to push harder.

Candice leaned over the table to give him a piece of her mind. "Don't be so wishy-washy. You owe it to yourself to try with all your might. It's the only way you'll know for sure that it was hopeless all along."

"Your advice gives me whiplash," Miles told her.

"But you're going to follow it anyway, aren't you?" she said confidently.

Miles couldn't deny it. "I don't really have a choice. So far I haven't been able to stay away from him."

When he stopped outside Triple J's and parted with Candice, Miles was greeted by the view of a pristine blue sky. Blinding sunlight made for a bright and cheerful winter's day. After admitting that he couldn't stay away, Miles knew that he might meander around town for a while, but eventually he would find himself at Gavin's bookstore.

Looking up between the buildings, Miles let the sun blind him for a second. It didn't do much to bring him back to his senses. Gavin was still all he could think of, but it took a little while for him to build up the courage to go to him.

Ending up at the Bookworm might have been inevitable, but that didn't mean that his heart didn't race once he found himself standing in front of that familiar sign. He needed to calm down. No chance of that. Right before he stepped through the door of the bookstore, he got really anxious. What if this was the day Gavin told him that he didn't want him to come back? Miles might go in there only for Gavin to warn him off. He always seemed to be on guard against Miles, which was why he hadn't dared to kiss him again. If he pushed things and then Gavin told him to stay away, Miles wasn't sure he could find the courage to defy him, and then he might never get to see him again. Gavin meant too much to him for him to risk that.

"Are you sure you're coming in?" Gavin asked him as he came out from the back of the store.

Miles realized he was holding the door open and staring off into space. "I thought I might come by and bug you," he said and let the door close behind him. He expected he would see Benji there, but there was no sign of him. "Where is your little guy?"

"Meredith took him to a movie with her nieces' kids. She'll be bringing him back in a few hours."

"So I have you all to myself. That's promising."

"If you don't count the customers," Gavin said and nodded toward the people browsing among the bookshelves.

Gavin went into the back again and Miles followed him. That old, creaky leather two-seater in the back brought back recent memories and dirty thoughts from way back when he used to work for Gavin. How many times did he fantasize about having sex with Gavin on that thing? More times than he could count. Miles did get to kiss him there, so that was something. But right now he needed to stop staring at that thing before Gavin guessed what he was thinking and kicked him out.

"Are you sure your ankle is all better. I can help out again if you want," Miles said seeing Gavin shift some boxes around.

"For a guy who couldn't wait to quit working here the first time around..." Gavin started to say but Miles interrupted.

"It's not like I hated working here. I told you this place was a safe haven for me," Miles reminded him, but Gavin still questioned him.

"Is that what you said?"

"Yes. You and this place. I had kind of a rough coming out, with my family and everything. You were so steady and sure of yourself. I felt

grounded when I was here, like everything would be OK." Miles remembered the feeling. It would hit him as soon as he walked through the door. "When I was here I could believe that what was going on with me wasn't the end of the world. I just had to get through it and come out on the other side."

Hearing this, Gavin looked somber and regretful as he sat down at his desk with a sigh and hung his head. "I wish I had known about it back then."

"You helped me even without knowing," Miles told him with a grin. "I didn't want to bring all that negative stuff here anyway. When I walked through the door, I wanted to leave all that crap behind me."

"But you left. You quit," Gavin said as he turned in his office chair to fully face Miles where he stood in the middle of the room.

"I told you that being around you was too hard. I couldn't take it any more. If I stuck around, I knew I would end up doing something stupid. Then you would have to shut me down and tell me I didn't have a snowball's chance in hell."

"You had only just turned eighteen," Gavin said, confirming that Miles was right.

"But I was eighteen."

"That's a technicality," Gavin countered.

"It's a fact."

Gavin shook his head like he still wanted to deny it. "Didn't you just tell me that you needed a safe haven. Getting hit on by your boss..."

"Would have been a dream come true," Miles told him.

Gavin didn't take what he said seriously. He shook his head again.

"You are so clueless. Is it so hard for you to believe that I had a crush on you?" Miles said getting a little annoyed. Then he had to correct himself because crush didn't seem like the right word. It was too juvenile and fleeting, not what he felt at all. "Or more like a case of insatiable lust for your hot body and mind."

"Right," Gavin said, dismissing what he said regardless of how he said it.

"It's true. I remember you were seeing that Trevor guy. Fuck that made me insane." Just thinking about it made him crazy, but it seemed like Gavin barely remembered the guy.

Gavin looked like he was trying to picture him as he squinted into the middle distance. "Trevor, huh. He wasn't bad, but we only went out a handful of times."

He had made more of an impression on Miles. He was casually but expensively dressed and had broad shoulders and perfect hair. He was the anti-Miles. "I only saw him that one time, and it made me go out of my mind with jealousy. He stopped by the store, said you forgot your scarf in his car. He was all over you. I knew there would be more

of that kind of thing and I would just have to stand by and watch. I had to bail."

"I almost believe you," Gavin said as he regarded Miles with a faint smile.

"Believe what you like," Miles said testily and turned away. He was getting worked up as he remembered how much it hurt to see Gavin with some other guy, who held his hand too long, who had his arm around Gavin's waist, and the whole time knowing he would never get that close.

Except he did, right here. Miles shifted his gaze back to Gavin, but he had turned to face his computer screen. Pushed by a deep need for him, Miles approached him slowly, almost like he was stalking him. He had to close the distance between them, he had to break through to him.

With only the vaguest idea of what he wanted to happen, Miles stopped right behind his chair and whispered, "You don't know how much you mean to me." He loomed over Gavin at his desk, and when he turned to him, Miles kissed him.

Just like before, he expected Gavin to push him away, and just like before it didn’t happen. He stepped back on his own and looked at Gavin.

"You aren't mad?" Miles asked him.

"Why would I be?" Gavin said as he stood up and placed his hands on Miles' shoulders.

Miles just hoped he wasn't trembling like an idiot as he said, "I don't know. But I'm glad you're not."

They started kissing again, moving against each other, colliding. Cocks hard, pressed together, they kissed each other deeper and more urgently all the time. While kissing and groping Gavin, Miles backed himself into the leather sofa, hitting it with a grunt.

He stayed on his feet only because he was holding on to Gavin so fiercely, but then he decided to let himself fall. Landing with his back on the sofa, he pulled Gavin down with him. Miles hooked his legs and arms around him and then he heard a bell. Gavin grunted, squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth. Then he tore himself from Miles' hold and got up off of him. Standing over him, Gavin breathed deeply a few times as he stared down at Miles where he panted and blinked up at him.

As Gavin walked out, Miles realized that what he heard was the bell by the register. He heard Gavin greet a customer and then check them out. Miles stood up and tried to get himself under control. He knew Gavin wouldn't come back to continue what they started. It was crazy to try to get anything going while customers were milling around the front of the store. But it had felt so wonderful and the passion he felt

from Gavin couldn't be denied.

Chapter 9

Gavin didn't know of he had been in the middle of a dream or what, but suddenly he had trouble breathing. His eyes snapped open, and he found himself staring at a pair of eyeglasses. It was Benji and he was pinching his nose.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hi, Benji. And why are you trying to kill me this morning?" Gavin asked him groggily. His bedroom was dark with only a light from the hallway to see by. Benji was standing between him and the clock so he didn't know what time it was.

"It's gonna be Christmas soon," Benji announced.

"Yes, it is. Glad you're so well informed. Go back to sleep," Gavin told him and turned over to try and go back to sleep himself.

"I don't have a gift for you," Benji said while poking his back with a tiny finger, which felt very pointy and insistent.

"I told you to just make me something," Gavin said and turned over to face Benji again.

"I don't know what to make."

"Knit me a sweater," Gavin told him.

"Whaaa?" Benji said in alarm. "I don't know how."

Gavin picked something easier. "Draw me a really nice picture then."

That wasn't the end of it though. "What kind of picture do you want?"

"Anything you like. Now go back to sleep."

"I want to get you a real gift," Benji said and leaned his head on Gavin's chest as he pouted in exasperation.

"When you get a job you can get me a real gift," Gavin said.

"Only big people have jobs, not little kids," Benji informed him and raised his head to stare at him.

"You'll be big some day."

Benji straightened and looked thoughtful. "Maybe," he said like he still hadn't made a final decision on that.

"Definitely. But you're still little so you should do what I tell you. Go back to bed," Gavin said and then watched Benji scamper away.

Now Gavin could close his eyes again and try to go back to sleep. He was just settling into his pillow when his alarm went off. So much for a few more minutes of sleep. He gave up and sat up against the headboard. As he looked at the calendar on his phone, his thoughts turned to Miles. That's what happened if he let his thoughts wander for even a moment.

The last time he stopped by the store, Miles had made him lose his head. Gavin had been ready to take him right there in the back room

with customers right out there. There was no denying how much he wanted Miles even as he tried to keep him at arm's length.

Gavin hadn't seen Miles for the last few days. Instead of using the time to try and regain his equilibrium, Gavin let his mind dwell on every moment of their last kiss and the other two before. What was it about Miles' mouth that was so intoxicating? Why did he seem so blindingly beautiful, his body hard, his skin warm to the touch, his moans like a drug he couldn't get enough of?

Gavin was just wondering in the interest of science. He was an idiot, and he couldn't wait to see Miles again so he could torture himself some more by asking pointless questions and then trying to answer them by giving into every crazy impulse Miles stirred up.

As Gavin was trying to shore up his defenses against his next appearance, Miles barged in through the door and looked relieved to see Gavin behind the counter. "There you are. I came in yesterday right after work and what did I find, not my hunky man but a little old lady."

"I'll make sure to tell Meredith that you called her a little old lady," Gavin told him.

"No, it was her mother, Lucille. She was playing Mrs. Claus for the kids' reading thing."

Gavin knew what he meant. "Oh, right. Benji and I missed that. A parent teacher conference at Benji's school ran a little late."

"I was hoping to take you guys out for lunch yesterday, but now I'll settle for dinner. Can we do it?" Miles asked as he came over to the register.

Gavin knew the right answer, but he couldn't get the words out right away. "It's not a good idea. I don't want Benji getting confused. You'll get bored and he'll be asking me where is Miles? Doesn't he like us any more?" Gavin said and felt his chest constrict at the thought. Now that he said it like that, the possibility seemed all too real, even inevitable and he hated it.

"Hey, give me a little credit. I'm not that fickle. You know I actually considered skipping classes so I could come here, and the day before I wanted to skip work."

"That sounds kind of irresponsible. What exactly is your point?" Gavin had to ask.

"You're missing my point. I'm never going to want to give you up. You're a permanent addiction," Miles said vehemently. Leaning over the sales counter, he stared at Gavin hard with those beautiful light brown eyes.

Gavin forced himself to look away. "Me? I can't imagine being anyone's addiction."

"You are mine. It's torture to go without seeing you even for one day," Miles claimed.

His dramatic words only gave Gavin the impression that he wasn't taking this seriously at all. "I'm not playing around, you know," Gavin said, his tone of voice suddenly harsh.

Startled, Miles drew back.

"Sorry. I..." Gavin started to say. He hadn't meant to speak like that to Miles. He didn't deserve it.

Miles shrugged and gave him a lopsided smile. "Don't worry about it. I'm not delicate. But I'm not playing around either," he said as a serious, determined look shone from his eyes.

Gavin sighed. "OK, but I do need to be careful now that I'm a dad. When someone comes into my life, they come into Benji's life too."

"Then I guess I'll just have to prove myself to both of you," Miles said and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Feeling the warmth and softness of his lips, Gavin had to resist the urge to grab him and kiss him properly. He shouldn't be patting himself on the back resisting those kinds of urges in the middle of the store. That was the bare minimum. Right now Gavin should be sending some kind of clear message to discourage him. For one thing he could be unwelcoming and more standoffish, the way he used to be in the old days when Miles worked for him.

Except he didn't really want Miles to stay away. He was always looking out the store windows, hoping to see Miles coming up the sidewalk then coming in with that gorgeous smile on his face. Damn it. No matter how much he complained, the only message Gavin was capable of sending was how very happy he was to have him around.

When Benji came from school and saw Miles there, he was happy too. Today he was brought to the store by a mother of a new kid at kindergarten. Her son, Drew, was painfully shy so she arranged to bring Benji from school and treat him to lunch. She wanted to make sure her son made friends and didn't feel lonely.

Drew and his mom came into the store to say hi, and Benji insisted on giving them a tour of the bookstore. He started by showing off Gavin and then Miles. "This is my dad. He likes books but he doesn't like sweet stuff. I don't know why." Benji showed his dismay by shaking his head sadly and Miles laughed.

Now Benji pointed at him. "This is Miles. He is friends with us and he knows what's good to eat. He's homework buddies with me."

"Nice to meet you guys," Miles said while Drew's mother looked at him appreciatively.

After Benji led them around the store, both mother and son came to the register with armfuls of books.

"I guess I have a little salesman on my hands," Gavin said as he rang up their purchases.

"It's funny. Benji seemed so shy and quiet until we walked in through that door," Drew's mother said.

"I told you this place was magic," Miles threw in.

Gavin didn't remember him saying that, but being here made Drew more animated too. He and Benji had their heads stuck in the same book and were discussing whether the bear in the book was scary or not.

Once their books were paid for, Drew and his mom left, both of them looking happy while Benji waved and told them to come back soon. After they were gone, Benji grew serious and turned to Gavin with a question. "Do you know yet?"

"Know what?" Gavin asked.

"You forgot already," Benji accused him and folded his arms while looking at Gavin sternly over the top of his glasses.

"Doesn't he look adorable," Miles said then nudged Gavin. "Quick. Take a picture."

"Shh. He's trying to look tough," Gavin whispered to him.

Miles corrected himself. "I meant tough. Real tough. I might even be a little bit scared. So what's this about?" he asked Benji.

"Dad is giving me a hard time," Benji said and pouted.

Gavin was still confused. "What? How?"

"Christmas present," Benji said drawing out the last word.

"You aren't getting him something he wants?" Miles guessed.

"His gift isn't the problem. He's overthinking my Christmas gift. He doesn't know what to get me," Gavin told him.

"And Dad isn't helping," Benji added. Then he turned an imploring look to Miles. "You help me."

"How about if you get your dad a book?" Miles said pointing all around.

Benji shot down that suggestion right away. "Dad has too many books."

Gavin objected, "There is no such thing as too many books."

"See?" Miles said still trying to sell him on the book idea but Benji wasn't convinced. Miles went over to Gavin. "I need to pick up a few things. Should I take him shopping?" He kept his voice low so that Benji wouldn't be disappointed if Gavin said no.

"Is this your way of proving yourself?" Gavin asked.

"You know I like to be helpful, plus I need to pick up a few more gifts anyway. I can't just buy books for everyone," Miles claimed.

"I don't see why not," Gavin said. "OK. Take him, but try to be a good influence."

"No spitting on the sidewalk. Got it." When Gavin made a face, Miles

assured him, "I never do that anyway. Promise."

Watching the two of them go, Gavin felt such an incredible tightness in his chest. He wasn't sure what the feeling was only that it was sweet and painful and reached all the way down to his soul. Benji was all bundled up and excited, bouncing happily next to Miles. At the door, Miles stopped and turned to Gavin to say, "Thank you."

Chapter 10

Miles didn't fool himself that this shopping trip with Benji was no big deal. This was major. Gavin was trusting him with Benji. There wasn't a bigger deal than that. Benji was the most important thing in Gavin's world, and Miles was kind of amazed that he got to take him shopping.

They headed up the street and Miles noticed that some puddles had frozen over. "The sidewalk looks a little icy. You want to hold my hand? That way we can both fall down together." Miles held out his hand, and Benji smiled and took it. Even through two pairs of gloves, Benji's hand felt tiny in his. If he didn't already know it, that simple sensation would have told him what an awesome responsibility this was.

"It's slippy," Benji said as he took careful steps over the icy patch.

"Too bad we don't have ice skates," Miles said as he held Benji's hand tightly.

"Me and Dad went ice skating. We fell down a lot. It was funny, but then my but hurt," Benji told him.

"Gavin falling down. I wish I had seen that. Next time take pictures," Miles instructed him. "Oh better yet, video." As some stores came into view, Miles asked Benji about what kind of gift he might want to buy.

"I have to get something really good," was Benji's very specific answer.

"We'll go somewhere where they only have good things. I guess Gavin is a pretty good guy. He deserves something nice," Miles told him.

"That's right, but I call him Dad, not Gavin."

"I would be a better dad," Miles boasted to see what Benji would say.

Benji denied it right away. "No one is a better dad than Dad."

Miles wished Gavin was there to hear his son giving him top marks.

Though he regarded Miles critically, Benji did have a job for him, "You can help me get Dad a good present."

"You probably just want me to lend you money."

"You have money?"

"Sure."

"Lots of money?"

"No. But enough to buy us a treat," Miles said when Candysaurus came into view. "Let's go pick out something yummy. And we'll take something to your dad too."

"No. Dad doesn't like sweet stuff," Benji reminded him.

"Just for us then," Miles decided.

"They are playing Christmas songs. Yey!" Benji said as soon as they

walked into the colorful, sweet smelling store.

"What a strange child," Miles said under his breath. Christmas music had been getting on his nerves since before Thanksgiving.

Candysaurus was the mascot for the store, a friendly, blue, stegosaurus-like dinosaur, who was featured on all their bags. They also sold key chains, beanies and candy jars in the shape of the Candysaurus. Benji was convinced that his dad wouldn't like any of it. They got something for Benji, though he wasn't allowed to eat it until he got permission from his dad.

About a block away from the candy store, the craft store caught Miles' eye and he wondered if Benji might like to make something. They went in and Miles noticed that they had a section for selling premade craft projects. He led Benji in that direction. "Let's see if we can get some ideas," Miles said but he was thinking that someone might have already done the dirty work of actual crafting, and they might be able to take advantage of that.

At first he didn't see much that would appeal to Gavin. They could always default to a coffee mug, or tea mug in Gavin's case. Miles was busy reading a literary quote that had been hand painted on one of the mugs when he spotted something even more bookish. Benji liked a candle in the shape of a snowman, but Miles drew his attention to what he had found.

"Do you think your dad might like a book jacket?" he asked Benji and pointed out a shelf with book jackets in different sizes.

"Jacket?" Benji said and pulled at the collar of his own jacket, which was unzipped so he wouldn't get hot inside the store.

"Yes, but this one goes on a book. Books need to stay warm too."

Benji wasn't too sure about this whole keeping books warm idea, but he looked at the book jackets anyway. "This one," he said, picking out one with a cartoonish spaceship design. "Is it good?" he asked Miles.

It seemed more appropriate for a kid, but Miles certainly wasn't going to talk him out of it. "That's a great one."

It turned out that Benji would need to borrow some money after all. He was only supposed to spend five bucks on a gift for his dad. Miles was glad to pitch in. He remembered when he was a kid and his dad used to tell him to just buy him something from the dollar store. And his mom loved anything he made her no matter how badly. Now those memories just made Miles feel sad. That's why he decided to give Gavin some happy memories. He got a handmade photo album and chose one that had a different cartoonish design on every page so Benji would approve of it.

"We're going to fill this with pictures of you and your dad. I'll print some up," Miles told him. It was a gift Gavin was guaranteed to like,

but he worried that it might put Gavin on the spot since he might not get him anything. "It can be from both of us," he said to Benji. That should take the pressure off, and Benji was happy to hear it.

What Miles really wanted was to give Gavin a different kind of gift, something that screamed, "I want to be your boyfriend." But that could easily backfire, plus he couldn't afford much. His gift budget was pretty much blown. This photo album was a gift that wouldn't break the budget or set off any alarms with his skittish future lover.

As soon as they stepped out of the store, Miles texted Gavin with an update, "Mission accomplished."

Gavin texted back that he would come and meet them and Miles smiled. That was an unexpected treat. He thought they would be heading back now and he would then go home alone.

"Your dad is coming to hang out with us. We better make sure he doesn't see his gifts," Miles told Benji.

Worried, Benji looked at the bag Miles carried. "Don't let him look."

"I won't," Miles said and held on to the bag protectively.

"What did you get?" Gavin asked as soon as he joined them.

After giving his dad a quick hug, Benji came to stand between him and Miles. He held his arms out to block his dad from coming any closer and said, "No peeking."

"You can't see these, but Benji can show you what he has in his bag," Miles told Gavin.

"It's a marshmallow snowman. We got it at Candysaurus," Benji said. "Can I eat him?"

"OK, but you have to share." Gavin leaned over close to Miles as they walked. "Don't let him eat that whole thing," Gavin begged him.

"Hey, Benji are you going to share the snowman with me and your dad?" Miles asked.

"OK," Benji said and pulled it apart until it tore in two. Now he stared at the two halves, not sure how to divide it in three.

"You can just give half to Miles," Gavin told him.

"Told you he didn't like sweets," Benji said.

Miles picked the bottom half, which didn't really look like anything more than a round marshmallow blob. He offered it to Gavin. "Want a bite?"

Gavin only laughed as he dodged the unwelcome offer.

"You made Dad laugh. Do it again," Benji said, encouraging Miles to torment his dad.

"Maybe later. We don't want him to overdo it," Miles said. When he saw that Benji was ready to bite the head off the snowman, Miles turned away and buried his face in Gavin's shoulder. "I can't watch."

"Let's stop here," Gavin said and pointed at the door of Turner Thrifts. As a cash strapped college student, Miles was no stranger to the place and many like it. Gavin looked in through the window. "I think they might have some new arrivals."

Following his gaze, Miles saw that he had zeroed in on the book section. "You've got to be kidding me. You are around books all day," Miles said as he and Benji followed him inside.

Gavin wasn't kidding though. He couldn't wait to go digging through the piles of used books. "Why don't you and Benji have a look around? Then meet me back here. I'll be the guy with a stack of books in my arms."

"OK then. We'll leave you to it," Miles said and went off with Benji, leaving Gavin to his book bingeing.

After passing up some pots and pans, Miles and Benji found an isle they liked. It had toys as well as random, fun bric-a-brac. Miles was eying a cookie jar in the shape of a penguin. He was about to point it out to Benji when Miles heard him start to cry while calling out, "Momo, Momo."

Miles got down to crouch in front of him. "Hey, little guy, what's going on? Did something scare you?"

Benji clutched at his sleeve and pointed at a teddy bear on the shelf that was too high for him to reach, and said, "Momo."

Before he could figure out why a stuffed toy was making Benji cry, Miles wasn't surprised to see Gavin running over. Parents hear everything. Gavin looked grim, tamping down any alarm he felt hearing his little boy cry. Once he saw the reassuring look Miles gave him, Gavin took a deep breath and came over more calmly. He picked up Benji in his arms and tried to figure out what was going on.

"What's wrong, Benji?"

Sniffling while Gavin put his glasses on top of his head and wiped his tearful face, he told his dad, "I found Momo."

"Who's Momo?" Gavin asked as he put the glasses back on Benji's face.

"I think it's that bear," Miles said and got the stuffed animal from the shelf. The bear was caramel colored and had a price tag tied around his foot.

"Momo," Benji called out and reached out for him. Miles handed it over and Benji hugged the toy to him.

"Momo was your bear?" Gavin asked.

"I lost him. I couldn't find him anywhere," Benji said and he looked heartbroken.

"We found him now," Miles told him.

Benji nodded and clutched the bear tightly. From the look on his face, Gavin would have given his right arm and a million bucks to buy

him that bear, but it only cost him two bucks. Benji was so happy. They bought the bear right away but then stayed to pick up some books and that penguin cookie jar.

As he walked Gavin and Benji home, Miles was surprised to be invited to join them. "I'm coming up?"

"If you have time, we'd like you to help us celebrate. This is Momo's special homecoming," Gavin told him.

"You have to," Benji insisted.

"And since it's a special occasion, we'll order pizza," Gavin decided as they waited for the elevator.

Pizza was ordered on the way up, but as soon as they got inside the apartment, Gavin had another task lined up. "While we're waiting for pizza, I think Momo could use a bath," he told Benji.

Since he had only just been reunited with him, Benji wasn't eager to give up Momo. Gavin wasn't about to let him cuddle with a thrift store bear without getting him clean first though.

"Everyone has to take a bath some time, even Momo," Miles pointed out as Benji gave up his treasured bear reluctantly.

With Benji following close on his heels, Gavin took the teddy bear to the kitchen sink.

"You're washing Momo by hand," Miles said seeing the bear get all sudsy while Benji looked on, craning his neck. Miles picked him up and sat him down on the kitchen counter next to the sink.

Gavin smiled at his little boy and kissed the top of his head. "I don't dare put him in the washing machine. I might risk a few spins in the dryer on low so he'll be ready for Benji to take to bed with him."

"I guess taking him to bed is non negotiable," Miles said looking from Gavin to Benji.

Later on, after Benji was in bed with the bear that had dried just in time, Miles stood around in Gavin's living room. He wasn't sure if he was staying or going. That was up to Gavin, but he did wonder about their thrift store find.

"Momo 2.0," Miles said. "Do you think there is any way that might be Momo 1.0?"

"It isn't likely but who knows," Gavin said with a sad smile. "From what Benji said when I was putting him to bed, he used to have a bear that looked like that one, but it got lost when he was moved around in foster care."

"Good thing you have an incurable book obsession. Going into that thrift store was a stroke of genius," Miles told him.

"I'm glad you were there, even if I don't want to lean on you too much. It felt good," Gavin said and looked shy abut it.

"You can lean on me. Why not? I'm sturdy. Go ahead, test me out," Miles said and bumped him with his shoulder.

"Yeah. You're not so bad," Gavin said and kissed him on the cheek.

"Now you're starting to appreciate me. Keep up the good work," Miles said.

"So while you're here, do you want to watch TV with me and make out on the couch?" Gavin asked.

For a minute Miles was speechless and happy. Instead of giving an answer, he just threw himself into Gavin's arms.

Chapter 11

On the day they found Momo, another ill advised impulse landed Gavin in Miles' arms again and left him horny and unsatisfied when he left. Gavin had no one to blame but himself. He found Miles irresistible. He could still remember how he felt when they were wrapped around each other, kissing and grinding on his couch.

Gavin was at the bookstore, trying to dispel those memories when he saw Miles coming in through the door with his arm thrown over another young guy's shoulders. The guy was slim, attractive, not very tall, and Gavin was ready to strangle him. Ignoring Gavin's murderous glower, Miles greeted him cheerfully.

"Look, I brought you business. This is my roommate, Darren. He was curious about you. I told him he could meet you but the price was he had to do some of his Hanukkah shopping here," Miles said.

"Nice to meet you," Gavin lied and shook Darren's hand.

As he did, he found himself thinking that this guy was way too good-looking to be living with Miles. OK, that wasn't the most sane thought he ever had, but there it was nonetheless. And Gavin had always imagined himself to be a rational, coolheaded sort of guy. Now that self-delusion was shattered just because Miles had his arm around some guy.

They went off to look around the store together, with Miles acting the salesman in his usual, hectoring way. As they walked around, the two stood too close and laughed too often for Gavin's liking. Every time they were out of his sight, he was ready to go over and break them apart.

Unreasonably jealous but unable to push the feeling aside, Gavin looked away from them. He had the urge to pull Miles away from that guy, get between them, stake his claim. Why the hell not? What was left to stand in his way? Hadn't his self-restraint already crumbled to nothing? Why not walk over there, grab Miles and kiss him, make everything crystal clear to this Darren and the whole world.

That was insane and the last thing Gavin would do. Still, the impulse was there, as was the nagging thought that maybe he was so worried about their friendliness because he knew he wasn't right for Miles no matter how desperate he was to hold onto him.

After Darren did his shopping and left, Miles grinned at Gavin triumphantly. "See, I'm good for business." Noticing his weird mood, Miles peered at him intently. "You are being distant. What happened? You aren't having second thoughts about me again, are you?"

Gavin turned the question around on him. "What about you? Any second thoughts?"

"Me? I didn't have first thoughts. I'm not the one dragging my feet. You are," Miles said and leaned over the sales counter so he could glare at Gavin.

"I don't see how you can be ready for this. A package deal, me and Benji..."

"I just am. I know what I want. And I told you that I would prove myself to you. Then you'll see for yourself," Miles vowed.

"You shouldn't have to do that. Why not go out with someone young and uncomplicated, like your roommate?" Gavin asked though the idea of it made him feel sick.

"Why should I settle for some copy of Darren? Why not Darren himself? He did ask me out when I first moved in with him and he hadn't met his boyfriend, JJ, yet," Miles bragged.

"And?" Gavin asked, irritated all over again now that he knew Darren really did have designs on Miles, and it wasn't all in his head.

"I agreed to go out with him," Miles said then stopped for effect. "But only as friends."

"He must have been crushed," Gavin said though he didn't feel sorry for Miles' roommate one bit.

"Why would he be?" Miles said with a shrug.

Gavin didn't think that needed explaining. "Because you rejected him, obviously."

Miles laughed. "No. He was fine. It was no big deal to him."

Gavin frowned skeptically. "I find that hard to believe."

"You think I'm all that, and a guy would be devastated if I fenced him into the friend zone?" Miles asked with a wicked grin.

Gavin opened his mouth then bit back his answer. "I guess I might have given away something there."

"Did you?" Miles said and peered at him, challenging him to say more.

"I can't imagine anyone not being crazy about you, and I was jealous when I saw you and Darren together," Gavin confessed in an irritated voice.

"Oh, man. You are a piece of work."

"Sorry. But you two seemed like a much better match and brought back my doubts about us. They are always just under the surface I guess."

"But you just can't resist me," Miles concluded rightly.

"Pretty much."

"Maybe you should stop messing around, be a stand up guy and ask me out."

Gavin smiled. "OK. Would you go out with me?" He tried to say it like it was no big deal, but his heart raced and his voice grew husky with emotion.

"Any time. Anywhere," Miles told him and leaned over the counter for a kiss.

"I'll talk to my friend Bruce to see if I can schedule a playdate for Benji and Marvin. Bruce is Marvin's father. He will enjoy hearing that we're dating. He likes nothing better than being right. Bruce manages a furniture store and his son is a few years older than Benji. Basically he's my evil twin."

"This Bruce, he's not good looking or anything, is he?" Miles asked, narrowing his eyes at him.

"Depends on what you like," Gavin told him enigmatically.

"That kind of answer doesn't put my mind at ease at all."

"Maybe I want to keep you on your toes," Gavin said. He liked that the shoe was on the other foot now.

"Well, my best friend, Candice, is a real looker. Ask anyone," Miles told him. "Straight up gorgeous. None of this 'depends on what you like' bullcrap."

"I'm real worried now," Gavin said mocking him, but he was actually really nervous, not about this Candice though. He was taking a major step egged on by a bout of jealousy. Once the thought occurred to him that Miles might start seeing someone else, the possibility became too real to him. He realized he couldn't let that happen, he couldn't let anyone steal him away.

He didn't want to leave an opening or some other guy would make his move. On a spur of the moment, he was taking this thing with Miles from an impulsive makeout or two to real dating. And the fact was that with Benji in his life, he wouldn't start dating anyone unless he was considering getting very serious. Whatever his misgivings, in his heart, he knew he couldn't let Miles get away.

Two days later, the playdate for Benji was arranged and he was eagerly waiting for Bruce and Marvin to come and pick him up. They were going to dinner and a movie first then to the mall. The little guy was sorry that he was going to miss out on spending time with Miles.

"It's not fair. I was friends with him first," he kept saying.

When Bruce and Marvin came by the apartment to get him, Benji told Gavin, "Say hi to Miles."

"I will," Gavin assured him.

"From me," Benji said.

"Yes. I got that," Gavin told him while Bruce scowled at him.

"Both father and son are smitten, and I haven't even met this guy," he complained.

"He's coming here," Benji tattled.

"Then we'll wait..." Bruce started to say.

Gavin cut him off. "You will not."

"Why not? Uncle Bruce and Miles can be friends too," Benji said. He was so sweet.

"Your dad is afraid I'm going to steal him," Bruce told him.

Suddenly Benji grew serious and fixed Bruce with a sharp gaze from behind his glasses. "You better not. I was friends with Miles first. Me and Dad."

Marvin sighed and spoke up for the first time. "Dad, you're gonna get in trouble and then we're gonna miss the movie. Let's go." He was six, with dark, curly hair and wisdom beyond his years.

"Check that out. The way my kid looks out for me," Bruce said and gave Marvin a bear hug.

"Me too," Benji said and raised his arms for a hug.

Bruce opened his arms for Benji to join their bear hug, but Benji shook his head and snubbed him. He jumped into Gavin's arms instead. Gavin held him tight then set him down and straightened his glasses. "Now you look nice. Have a good time," he said to Benji, who gave him a big grin.

"You too, Dad."

Once they were gone, Gavin felt like this date was bound to go well. After all Benji had given it his blessing. Despite that, while he waited he couldn't sit still. Finally there was a knock at the door, and Gavin felt a surge of excitement like he had never felt before a date until now. But then again, this was a date with Miles. It couldn't compare to any that came before.

Going to open the door to him, Gavin took a deep breath then said hi to Miles. As he tried to step out of the way so he could come in, Miles didn't let him. He threw his arms around him and kissed him. He sure knew how to greet a guy.

"As you see, I'm ready to go," Gavin told him once he could speak. He had one arm around Miles as they stepped in and he finally closed the door. "Bruce and Marvin already took Benji to dinner and a movie. Later I'll pick him up from the mall."

Miles took a step back and looked him up and down. Gavin still had to put his jacket on before they headed out. Maybe that's why Miles was eyeing him so critically. "What? No tie? You look spiffy anyway," Miles said running his fingertips over his crisp, button-down shirt.

Gavin put on the suit jacket to match his black slacks and returned the compliment. "You look nice too." No matter what he wore, Miles couldn't help but look good.

"I look the same as always," Miles scoffed. He continued more apologetically. "I wish I could dress up for you, but I don't really have date clothes. This is it unless you want to see me in my job interview shirt, which I only wear for jobs I don't actually want to get."

"I'll pass. And that's the same jacket you wore when you worked for me, isn't it?" Gavin asked as he watched Miles take a seat on the arm of the couch. That leather jacket was such a familiar sight. Gavin expected to see it whenever he saw Miles, like it was a part of him.

Miles smiled enigmatically at that. "The very same one."

"What?" Gavin asked squinting at the smile that lingered on Miles' face as well as the funny look in his eyes.

"This jacket is special. It was the first thing I bought with the money I got working for you," Miles told him and his eyes shone. "And guess which thrift store I got it from."

"No."

"Yup. The same thrift store where Benji found Momo."

"Damn," Gavin said and touched the jacket almost reverently.

Miles looked into his eyes as he stood up. "I know."

"I guess it was meant to be," Gavin said and beamed at Miles. "OK. We can go now."

"We aren't going anywhere fancy, are we?" Miles asked a little apprehensively as they stepped out the door and Gavin locked up.

"I wouldn't do that to you," Gavin said. When they got into the elevator, he took Miles' hand in his.

Chapter 12

The restaurant Gavin chose for their first date was a place he had never been to – Lou's Tavern and Grill.

"This place," Miles said as they pulled up in front. He laughed and clapped his hands. "I'm going to bet that you never took anyone here before."

"You would be right." Gavin had passed by many times and Benji was a big fan of the main feature of Lou's, from the outside anyway. Two halves of a classic, red Mustang were sticking out on either side of the building. The wall around them was made to look like the car had crashed through and somehow come out the other end.

"The physics of it makes no sense, but I don't suppose it bothers you," Gavin said as they got out of the car.

"Not even a little bit," Miles said with a grin. "I always wanted to come here. And you know I'm half expecting to find the other half of both of those cars inside. It could be like a really cool booth."

There were no cars inside the restaurant, but there were plenty of them in the vintage advertisements and movie posters plastered to the walls. The posters weren't framed and carefully arranged but stuck to the walls every which way, all crowded together and overlapping here and there. That was in keeping with the lively, casual atmosphere of the place.

"We have to bring Benji here," Miles said and Gavin looked over at him. It warmed his heart the way Miles thought of his son, considered what he might like without any apparent effort. It came naturally to him.

"I don't think he'll forgive us if we don't," Gavin told him.

Once they were seated, Miles looked at the menu eagerly. "They have lots of things on skewers. You have brought me to the right place."

Miles ordered pork and vegetable skewers and Gavin ordered shrimp and vegetable tempura, fully expecting Miles to steal them off his plate. Once the food arrived, Miles stopped eating long enough to ask, "We aren't just supposed to eat, right? We need to do small talk, chit chat, ask each other what we do for a living, that kind of thing?"

"You already know what I do. You could ask me why I wanted to own a bookstore if you want," Gavin suggested. It was a standard question he got to answer on dates.

"Is it because you like books?" Miles deadpanned.

"So you figured out my secret."

"OK, I'll bite. So what made you actually take the plunge into the book business?" Miles asked, playing along, but also waiting for Gavin to answer like he was really interested.

"First off, the money was there. My grandfather had left me money in a trust, it paid for my college, but I didn't get the rest of the money until I turned twenty-five. A few weeks after my twenty-fifth birthday, the Bookworm was put up for sale. I would pass by, go in, tempted but unsure. At the time, I had a corporate job and a corporate boyfriend. Neither one made me happy. After Quinn and I broke up, I decided I should at least have a job that made me happy and arranged to buy the bookstore. That's my story."

"That's interesting, but I'm fixated on this Quinn character," Miles told him with a sharp look in his eyes.

Gavin chuckled. "I told you, corporate – suit, tie, impeccably groomed and nice enough to be with."

"Ouch. Deadly. I hope you never describe me like that," Miles said as he reached over to grab a shrimp from Gavin's plate and dip it in the hot mustard sauce.

"Impeccably groomed?" Gavin teased him.

"Yeah. Not likely. I mean nice enough."

"I already have a tag reserved for you – Spectacular in bed," Gavin whispered as he leaned forward so Miles could hear but no one else would.

Miles blushed and had trouble swallowing. "I guess I have something to live up to," he gulped and stared at Gavin wide-eyed.

Gavin laughed and squeezed his hand. It wasn't often that he got the better of him, much less so easily.

When they were done with dinner, Gavin took them on a drive to Blue Spruce Lake. He parked in front of the very impressive Arcadia Hotel. Miles whistled as they got out of the car and he had a look at its huge balconies and beautiful holiday lighting display.

Though he seemed to like what he saw, he turned to Gavin worriedly. "Are we going in there?"

"We can if you want," Gavin offered. "But I thought we could walk around the lake. They have lighted paths and the view of the hotel from the other side of the lake is beautiful."

Gavin had guessed that would be more to Miles' liking that knocking around in a ritzy hotel. They both looked toward the calm water of the lake where the lights of the hotel were reflected on one side and the dark forest on the other. The lake was fairly small and only rowboats and small motorboats could be seen bobbing against the hotel dock. They headed away from the hotel, stepping onto the wooden planks that made up the paths around the lake.

It was a tranquil walk with many opportunities to duck into deep shadows of trees and kiss and fondle each other. The pine scent was all around. The music from a party at the hotel carried faintly over the

water, while closer to them, the waves of the lake splashed softly. With Miles in his arms, Gavin had never been happier.

"You managed a perfect date," Miles praised him.

"It's not over yet."

"Damn right. I'll never let it be over. That's why it's perfect," Miles told him and kissed him passionately.

Before driving back, they went to the hotel bar for drinks. Miles was a little intimidated by the elegant surroundings and also the guests from the party were constantly dropping in, all dressed to the nines. But then Miles had to get something non-alcoholic to drink and that put him at ease. Gavin asked him about that.

"It reminds me of high school, going to 7-Eleven and paying a guy to buy me a case of beer so I could go to a party in someone's basement and look cool," he explained with a grin as they sat at one of the small, intimate tables. "The cooler full of ice and beer cans was set up on the washer or the dryer, as were the chips, still in the bags so they were always spilling. Christmas decorations were packed away and piled up in one corner of the basement. Two dismantled cribs, a playpen and a twin stroller were in the other corner. The five-year-old twins were sitting at the top of the stairs in their pajamas and spying on us. Their brother would yell at them to go to bed, but they would just sneak back. Now that was a party."

Gavin couldn't help but laugh at that. "Sounds like a blast. And it isn't that far from what it will be like to date me," he predicted.

"Then I'm your guy," Miles said and reached for Gavin's hand where it rested on the table. Gavin held his hand, but what was happening under the table wasn't quite so sweet. Miles' other hand was busy inching up Gavin's thigh, making him gulp before he stopped him.

"We better go before we end up checking in," Gavin said and stood up hurriedly.

On the drive back, there was more of the same from Miles. His restless hands were a serious challenge to Gavin's concentration, but he didn't tell him to stop even as he risked driving into the bushes. He wanted those strong fingers squeezing his thigh, soft lips in the crook of his neck, teeth at his earlobe, a lick along his clenched jaw, and whispered promises in his ear.

"Is this the part of the date where we go back to your place?" Miles asked as his fingers traced a path from his knee to his crotch.

"If we make it that far," Gavin said in a husky voice.

"I guess I did a number on you," Miles said smugly then leaned in to nibble on Gavin's ear.

"Yes. The constant groping has had a slight effect," Gavin said

sarcastically.

Chapter 13

Miles had never been on a formal date, just casual hanging out that never led to anything real. Now that he had a taste of dating, he saw what he was missing. He loved the feeling that Gavin had set aside this time just for him, devoted himself only to him for the evening.

It was a good feeling that focused Miles' attention on a man who was already an obsession. In a way it was too much for Miles to take. It overwhelmed him. So much time alone with him had Miles all revved up, dying for him.

Though Miles was nervous about what was going to happen next, he still couldn't keep his hands off Gavin. He wanted to dig under his clothes, strip him naked and devour him. Gavin was beautiful and tonight he was all his.

They made it up to Gavin's apartment breathless, stumbling inside, kissing. Their tongues glided over each other until both he and Gavin were breathless and beyond aroused, and they had barely gotten through the door. That's why they didn't get any further than the couch.

Still kissing, they fell into it. There was an urgency to the way they grappled with each other's jackets then threw them aside with impatience before attacking each other again. Gavin got on top and Miles hooked his legs around him.

Miles didn't know when or how, but somehow while he was manhandled Gavin, he had managed to get all the buttons of his shirt undone. To make some room between them, Miles pushed him off a little. Grabbing the collar of Gavin's unbuttoned shirt, he yanked it off his shoulders and down his arms while his eyes roamed Gavin's perfect chest.

As soon as Gavin was out of it, Miles dropped the shirt to the floor unceremoniously. He wanted his hands free so he could grope him. His hands spread over Gavin's pecs, teased his nipples, raked over the muscles of his arms. Then his hands moved down to undo his fly.

He had Gavin's erection cupped in his hand even before he freed it. It was hard and thick in his hand. God he wanted it, even more so once it stood revealed. Miles was mesmerized. He almost forgot to get Gavin's pants all the way off. But he got to that soon enough and Gavin was kneeling naked in front of him. Miles had to touch him as urgently as if his life depended on it.

Running his hand over his thighs then back over his ass, Miles was admiring him, wanting him. The play of Gavin's muscles under his skin was a riveting sight, the heat under his exploring fingers burning him. Gavin's skin hot under his lips, Miles kissed him then bit him

lightly like he was truly driven not just to taste him but to devour him, consume everything that made him wonderful.

Suddenly Gavin stopped him. Miles looked at him questioningly but when Gavin started pulling off his clothes, he understood. It was only fair and incredibly arousing to be stripped bare by rough, demanding hands while Gavin's mouth was at his throat kissing a path down to his chest.

Now naked as well, Miles pressed himself against him with no space between them, skin on skin. Their mouths met and Miles kissed Gavin hard, digging his fingers through his dark hair to deepen the kiss until he drowned in this man. Gavin's hand wrapping around Miles' hard cock gently at first then harder making Miles thrust into it as he kissed and groped Gavin mercilessly.

They were grinding and groping each other as they kissed until Gavin's couch couldn't hold them any more. Rolling off the couch to the floor with grunts and curses, they ended up with Miles on top and Gavin panting under him. Miles sat up straddling his thighs and looked down at Gavin with naked admiration.

Miles couldn't wait any more. The sight of Gavin, his hard cock, his beautiful body, it was too much. "Fuck me already," he demanded.

"Alright," Gavin said, his voice thick. He pointed to a drawer and Miles got condoms and lube and set them on the coffee table, all without breaking eye contact with Gavin.

As the reality of the situation hit him, Miles gulped, but this was no time to get scared. He wanted this. He wanted Gavin more than anything. If he backed out now, he would never forgive himself.

Miles pretended that his legs didn't go weak, that his heartbeat didn't speed up out of control and that he didn't have to force himself to take each breath. He didn't want Gavin to know that he had never done this before.

Gavin's long, muscular legs under his groping hands, Miles moved up until he was straddling him higher. Rising to grab the bottle of lube, Gavin looked into Miles' eyes and reached behind him. Miles felt him press a finger to his hole. The sensation had him reeling. Miles dropped forward, boneless for a second then tensing as Gavin's lubed finger pushed in.

"First time," he whispered against Gavin's chest as he felt a second finger join the first and penetrate him even deeper. Gavin stopped. For a while all Miles heard was the sound of their ragged breaths as he squeezed his eyes shut. "You better not change your mind," he warned Gavin in a gravelly voice. Miles was ready to get seriously pissed off if Gavin backed out now. He opened his eyes and raised his head so he could glare at Gavin, only to find him glaring right back at him.

"You should have told me," Gavin said.

"Don't care. Get on with it," Miles told him, acting defiant but really scared that he might stop.

As if in answer, Gavin pressed in deeper. With his other hand, he raised Miles' face to him and kissed him hungrily. Fumbling with the condom, Miles couldn't believe how long he had waited and longed to have Gavin inside him. Gavin grabbed hold of his shaking hands and took the condom from him to roll it on himself.

"I might be a little nervous," Miles admitted.

"Me too," Gavin said but Miles saw no sign of it.

Guided by Gavin's strong hands on his hips, Miles moved into position. He lowered his weight slowly, teasing himself with the feel of Gavin's hard cock at his entrance. Then he pushed down and gasped as Gavin's cock threatened to split him open.

"Slow down," Gavin ordered him.

"You are not the boss of me," Miles grunted but he did as he was told.

Letting his body sheath Gavin's cock one excruciating inch at a time, he moaned and threw his head back. The feeling was incredible, full and painful and wonderful. He couldn't stop until Gavin was all the way inside him. Then he had to drop his head forward to look at him and tell him, "You feel amazing."

Gavin shook his head as his chest rose and felt with heaving breaths. "No. You do." He pushed his hands up Miles' abs to his chest and then down over his thighs.

Miles started moving again. Each time he rose, he felt like he was being pulled inside out, and in the next second he would ache to have Gavin deep inside him again. Lifting himself up then impaling himself on Gavin's cock again and again set off a quiver in his muscles as his whole body burned for release.

Miles was now bringing his body down hard, driven by an insane need to come and even more to make Gavin come. Gavin called his name and cursed. Thrusting up into him while Miles drove himself down to meet him with equal force, Gavin threatened to push him right over the edge.

His moans rose louder, longer as pleasure consumed him, but he wanted to come with Gavin. That's why Miles rode him harder and faster until he had him coming. Gavin surged up into him, his whole body tight and unyielding as he came with a growl. Hit by a tidal wave of pleasure, Miles was coming too, calling Gavin's name until he slumped down spent, caught in Gavin's strong arms as they both breathed hard.

Barely conscious as he rested on Gavin's heaving chest, Miles raised his head with effort. He had to look into Gavin's beautiful blue eyes, and then he had to kiss him. Aftershocks of pleasure slowly subsiding,

he still clung to Gavin like he was his only lifeline.

Lazy movements under him brought him out of his freefall into slumber. With a jolt of regret, Miles remembered that he couldn't stay. Even so, this night was everything he had ever dreamed of.

Miles turned, to nestle his face in the crook of Gavin's neck. When he saw him reach for his phone on the coffee table, he got it for him and handed it over.

"Almost time to go get Benji?"

"Yeah," Gavin confirmed and then texted with his friend.

"They are still at the mall. I'm going to meet them there. Would you like to come with me so you can meet Bruce?" Gavin eyed him like he already knew the answer.

"Yes, I would."

"Good. Benji would be disappointed if he didn't get to see you. He thinks it's selfish of me to keep you all to myself since you were buddies with him first," Gavin said and smiled.

"So father and son are both jealous," Miles accused him.

"And why are you dying to meet Bruce exactly?" Gavin accused him right back.

"All three of us then."

Remembering Darren and what prompted Gavin to ask him out on a date, Miles shook his head. Gavin had no reason to be jealous of anyone in the world. Even when he was only a dream to Miles, his focus stayed firmly on Gavin. He wasn't Miles' goal. He never thought he would have him. He was just a sweet dream he didn't want to relinquish because even as his yearning for Gavin seemed hopeless and impossible, it sustained him. Through the most difficult time in his life, Gavin had been there as his pillar of support even if he didn't know it.

It was close to closing time at the mall, but the place still looked festive, all lit up for the holidays. Bruce's text messages led the two of them to a shoe store. Bruce was somewhere in a line of about half a dozen people while Benji and another little boy were waiting nearby. The other boy was a little older and taller than Benji, with a head of curly hair and big eyes. Miles could guess that he was Bruce's kid even before Benji introduced him and Miles eagerly.

"That's Miles," Benji said as the kids ran over to him and Gavin. "This is my friend Marvin."

"Marvin. Marv for short, right?" Miles said as he shook hands with the little boy.

"Marv?" Benji said and looked at his friend questioningly.

"At school, some kids call me Marv," Marvin said.

"Me too! I want to call you Marv," Benji said and Marvin said it was

OK. "Marv's dad has a store too, but it's not for books. It's for furniture. Sometimes we play in the store."

"Do you get to jump on the beds?" Miles asked.

"Not allowed," Benji said as they both shook their heads and looked mournful about it.

"Too bad," Miles told them.

"Yeah, we have a strict 'You break it. You bought it' policy," a very hunky guy said as he came over to join them.

"Let me guess. Bruce?" Miles said as the big man shook his hand in a crushing grip.

"The one and only," Bruce said and gave him a blindingly confident grin.

"There's probably more than one Bruce," Gavin grumbled next to him and looked ready to slap Bruce's hand away if he didn't let go of Miles right now. "This is Miles. Are you planning to let go of his hand any time soon?"

Not to be outdone by that show of jealousy, Miles took his hand back from Bruce and put his arm around Gavin. One arm slung over his shoulders possessively, Miles eyed Bruce with a look that wasn't at all hostile, but that did say very clearly, "Mine. Do not touch."

Bruce seemed amused by the gesture. "Back in the day, I always wanted to come by the bookstore and have a look at you, but I never got the chance before you skedaddled."

"Have a look at me? Why?" Miles wondered and looked over at Gavin, who hung his head. Now Miles was even more interested in the answer, but both Bruce and Gavin wanted to get their kids home and to bed.

"Marv doesn't have to go to bed early like I do. He's so much bigger than me," Benji said as they all went to the parking lot then split up to go to their respective cars.

"So much bigger," Miles said.

"Aha. Marv said kindergarten isn't even real school," Benji said and looked from Gavin to Miles to see if they agreed.

"Do you get homework?" Miles asked him.

"Yes. I get homework all the time," Benji told him.

"Then it's school," Miles said as Gavin unlocked the car and opened the back door for Benji.

"Did you have fun?" Gavin asked Benji as he climbed in and let his dad buckle him into the seat.

"Yes. Did you?" he wanted to know.

Gavin got a funny look on his face and didn't answer right away. What kind of fun was he thinking about? Miles had some idea. That's why he answered for him.

"We had lots of fun, but we missed you," Miles told Benji, who

beamed at him then looked shy and tiny in his car seat.

When they dropped Miles off at his place, Gavin got out to say goodnight.

"So that was Bruce. I don't know who would be into that," Miles said and glared at Gavin.

"Not me," Gavin told him.

"I can't believe you hang out with that guy. My friend Candice can't beat that, not in biceps circumference or in the pec area. If she can't compete, then neither can I," Miles complained.

"Then I guess it's a good thing you don't need to," Gavin told him. "Bruce and I went out exactly once and nothing came of it. And here I am asking you to go out with me again."

"That does make me feel a tiny bit better," Miles said and rewarded him with a kiss. Then he remembered how Bruce said he wanted to meet him. "Why was he so interested in meeting me back when I used to work for you anyway?" His eyes narrowed suspiciously at Gavin, who squirmed a little.

"Because he could tell I was having inappropriate thoughts about you," Gavin admitted with a resigned sigh.

"Tell me more. How pervy were these thoughts?"

"I'll save it for next time," Gavin told him, ready to drive his kid home.

"Thank you for tonight. Every second of it was amazing," Miles said. Getting uncharacteristically serious, he put his heart into every word.

"You are amazing," Gavin said and he kissed him tenderly.

As he drove away, Miles and Benji waved at each other until the car turned and sped out of sight. Then Miles just stood there for a while. It felt like things were really starting, but he still worried. That was only one date, and Gavin had dated a bunch of guys, even that Bruce.

None of those guys managed to seal the deal. And from what Gavin said, none of them came close to capturing his heart. That's why Gavin was still a free man. Miles was ready to hand over his heart to him, but he had a feeling that Gavin wouldn't be so easy to nail down.

Chapter 14

It had been two days since their date, and in that time Miles and Gavin had only exchanged a few friendly texts. Miles could have dropped by the store, but after their date went so well, he didn't want to risk messing things up. That didn't mean he could wait forever to see Gavin again, and this morning he reached the limit of his endurance.

Since he had classes today, Miles rushed to get to the bookstore. He was still clutching the keys to his apartment when he swung open the doors of the bookstore and went over to hug Gavin and give him a quick good morning kiss.

"I practically jumped out of bed and came straight here so I could see you before class. I haven't even had coffee. Caffeinate me," Miles demanded as soon as his lips parted from Gavin's.

"Good morning," Gavin said as if this was the right time to practice good manners.

"My lips already said good morning. Caffeinate me already," Miles told him.

Gavin led the way into the back where the coffeemaker was sitting on a little cabinet with wheels. Not that any coffee was going or anything. "I was going to make some tea but..."

At the mention of tea, Miles didn't even bother to let him finish what he was saying. "You are so grandma. I'll make some joe like a real man."

"Half the world drinks tea, you know," Gavin pointed out as he searched for some coffee in the cupboard under the coffeemaker.

"And I feel sorry for those guys. Maybe coffee isn't legal over there or something."

"I'm afraid it's not very fresh," Gavin said as he unearthed a can of coffee and handed it over.

Miles grabbed the can, grateful that he had any at all. He opened it and found that there wasn't much in there, but it would do. Once he got it started, the coffeemaker dribbled out the coffee too slowly for his liking. Miles leaned down to glare at the meager puddle of very dark coffee through the murky glass of the carafe. "Is this thing clogged? The way it's going, I won't be drinking coffee until next week."

Gavin shrugged. "I haven't used it recently. Meredith drinks tea too. I did use it for a while to make tea, but then I got the little microwave in here."

"You used it to make tea? Sacrilege! If my coffee tastes funny, I'll know who to blame," Miles told him.

"I can still make you some perfectly drinkable tea if you want. I have green and black," Gavin offered.

"I won't fall for your tricks. Black tea is a complete misnomer. More like slightly brownish."

"You sure are crabby before you have your coffee," Gavin said with a smile.

Miles scratched his head and gave him an apologetic look. "I have many layers. This is my 'before I've had my first cup of coffee' layer."

Miles felt better once the coffee was ready and he had a few scalding sips of utter bitterness.

"How is the coffee?" Gavin asked him when he came out from the back with his cup.

"It's awful but it's heaven," Miles told him.

"You and coffee have a very strange and dysfunctional relationship," Gavin decided.

"Speaking of relationships," Miles said.

"Were we?" Gavin said evasively.

"We were. And there is something I want," Miles said and he stared at him intently, like he could will him to agree to his demands.

"Something other than coffee?"

"I want you to throw yourself into this wholeheartedly. I don't want to be dropped after a few dates."

"I can't make any promises, but I'll try," Gavin said.

"I'll accept that answer if you bribe me with sex. Flip the closed sign and we'll go in the back," Miles said. There were no customers there yet, but they could show up any minute. He was breathless as he waited for his reply.

In answer, Gavin took the coffee cup from his hand and set it on the counter. With a hand on his chest, he pushed Miles toward the back as he went to close up. Miles went into the back buzzing from coffee and the promise of sex. It would have to be a quickie. To save time, Miles unzipped his fly and started to take his sweater off. That's when he heard the door chime and a woman's voice. It was Meredith.

"Oh, you're here," she said, surprised.

Miles froze though she was still in front and couldn't see him. She was speaking to Gavin, who had made it only as far as the doorway leading to the back room. Now he turned back while Miles zipped up his fly. He realized that she must have a key.

"I saw the closed sign, and I thought you had to step out," Meredith said, her voice getting closer. "I just came in to pick up that order for the Regency reading group," she said.

"I'll get it," Gavin said and came into the back to grab a box. He took it back to Meredith without letting her know that Miles was back there. "Do you want me to carry it to the car for you?" he asked her.

"Oh, no. I can manage," Meredith said.

Miles heard the door chime and risked taking a peek out in front. He saw Gavin opening the door for Meredith and the box she carried. It seemed like Gavin was ready to lock up again as soon as she was gone. But just as he held the door open for Meredith, two other women walked into the store. So much for that quickie in the back.

Giving up, Miles sighed and slumped over in the doorway to the back of the store. Gavin smiled at him apologetically. He flipped the sign to open and resigned himself to being a responsible business owner for the rest of the day. Hearing Gavin greet the newly arrived customers, Miles went over to lean next to him at the register.

"Coming here to try and seduce me again?" Gavin asked.

"Is that what I did? I said two words. I think it was you who seduced me," Miles claimed.

"I was just minding my own business."

"That's when you're at your most irresistible," Miles said. "I have to go now. I'll be back later today. Is that OK?"

"I'll look forward to it," Gavin said and gave him an encouraging smile.

Well he was willing to close up shop for Miles. That was a good sign.

All day in class, Miles' thoughts strayed to when he would get to see Gavin again. He couldn't stand to be away from him. Being denied only made him want him more. Classes couldn't finish soon enough. Between classes, Miles called Candice and confessed to her that he might have a Gavin addiction.

"I don't want to be that guy – clingy, needing to see him all the time."

She had some straightforward advice for him. "Then don't be that guy. Be a different guy."

"I kind of want to be myself. I want this to be real. I'm just afraid that he'll never take the real me seriously." He knew he wasn't Gavin's type and that worried him.

"Probably not," she said easily.

"Don't agree with me. Encourage me. Tell me not to give up," he instructed her.

"OK, then. By all means go ahead and make a fool of yourself."

"Damn right I will. That man is worth it." Miles was insanely determined to see him as often as he could no matter how it made him look.

"Always happy to help encourage your worst instincts," Candice told him before she hung up.

Actually Miles had called her because she wasn't sappy. He needed a cold dose of reality where Gavin was concerned. Two years ago, Miles was sure that he didn't stand a chance with Gavin. He wasn't sure that

much had changed since then, only enough for him to get a foot in the door. He wasn't all the way in though. That's why he was afraid that the wrong move might get the door slammed in his face.

Once he was done with his last class, Miles texted Gavin. He was on his way to pick up Benji from kindergarten, and Miles decided to meet them on the way back. Why should Miles waste time pretending he wanted to be anywhere else besides with those two?

The day was bright and sunny. As he came up to them on the street, Benji spotted him first and yelled his name. The three of them grabbed some burritos for lunch and ate them while walking around. Benji spotted a tiny dog in a lady's purse and waved to him until the doggy was out of sight.

"That lady is so lucky," Benji pouted while Gavin wiped sauce off his chin.

"You'll have a dog some day. I promise," Gavin said and Benji cheered up immediately.

Seeing that they were near his apartment building, Miles invited them to come up and see his place. Benji was eager to see where he lived, so he was guaranteed to be disappointed by the cramped, grubby place Miles shared with his roommate, Darren.

Not that Darren was around much these days. As they went in through the front door, Miles told Gavin and Benji, "My roommate is always at his boyfriend's. That's his room." He pointed at his closed bedroom door. Then he pointed to the bedroom with the door standing open. "That's mine."

One thing stood out to Benji immediately. He stuck his arm straight out with an accusing finger pointing at Miles' rumpled sheets and blanket. "He didn't make his bed," Benji noted disapprovingly.

"I'll speak to him about that," Gavin said solemnly.

"I didn't know I was going to have guests," Miles said in his own defense.

"Are we the guests?" Benji asked his dad.

"You are very special guests," Miles told him.

Other than what he told them, he couldn't give them much of a tour. They could see the whole place right from the front door – a tiny kitchen, a narrow living room with an old couch and a much newer TV. Predictably, what caught Gavin's eye was the bookshelf.

"I see you found some room for books," Gavin said.

"Don't make me sound like a book freak. You're the book freak," Miles told him and stood in front of the shelf like he wanted to hide it from him.

Benji looked up at him. "Is that like a bookworm?" he wanted to know.

"That's another word for it. Yeah," Gavin told him.

"I'm a bookworm too," Benji said to Miles proudly.

Now that the tour was complete, Miles scooped up various debris from the couch and invited them to sit down. While Miles looked for where he could dump the sweater, various books and magazines that had littered the couch, Gavin leaned by the fridge. Benji wasn't interested in sitting either. He wanted to explore the vast, uncharted territory of Miles' apartment.

This worried Gavin a little, "There's nothing pornographic around here, is there?" he whispered to Miles.

"Not that he'll be able to find," Miles assured him.

Gavin narrowed his eyes at him. "So that's a yes."

"We don't have anything lying around. It's all in electronic form," Miles told him.

Though Benji was busy looking at the books and everything else he and Darren crammed on the shelves, Gavin continued to whisper in Miles' ear. "I guess the days of porn mags under the bed are over. But when I adopted Benji, I did have to lock away some vintage treasures."

"I am going to need to have a look at your stash," Miles told him.

"It's not a stash. It's a collection. Did you not hear me say the word vintage?" Gavin told him.

"Whatever you want to call it, I'm going to need to see it," Miles said as he ducked into the kitchen to see what he could offer his guests to eat and drink. That reminded him of something. "You know, Darren said I could never be a parent because I forgot a tub of ice cream on the counter once and it melted."

"Ice cream?" Benji asked. He had sneaked up on Miles. Standing on the other side of the refrigerator door, he leaned over to peer up at Miles.

"No, we don't have any. I was just saying that my friend was mad at me for leaving some ice cream on the counter to melt," Miles explained to him.

"Oh, no!" Benji looked stricken. "Was it alright?" he asked mournfully.

"The ice cream was OK, pretty much. It got a littlie icy when we put it to freeze again, but we ate it anyway," Miles told him.

"OK," Benji said with a relieved huff, then he admonished Miles. "But don't do it again."

"I won't, I promise," Miles said. As he watched Benji going off to explore the mysteries of his apartment some more, Miles noticed Gavin grinning at him.

"For someone who can't be trusted with a tub of ice cream, you're pretty good with Benji," he said and came to join him in the kitchen. "He has really taken a shine to you."

"And that worries you," Miles guessed.

"A little. But I can hardly tell him not to like you when I'm setting such a bad example."

"You mean you like me too?" Miles nudged him to get him to say more.

"I didn't realize that was a secret. I thought a few things we've done might have given me away."

"But it's not just physical, right. We have a real connection right, right, right?" Miles demanded.

"You need me to tell you?" he said, but he was just trying to avoid answering.

"Obviously! Give me an answer, but know that I will only accept a yes."

"Then you're not really asking, are you?" Gavin said but then he told him what he wanted to hear "Yes. We have something. It's not just physical." He said it grudgingly so Miles knew he still had plenty of reason to worry. But he had admitted it, however reluctantly, so there was also reason to hope.

Since Darren wasn't expected back, they made themselves comfortable and ordered in some Chinese. After dinner, they watched Darren's bootleg copy of the *Star Wars Holiday Special*. It was so exciting, it put Benji out like a light. With the little guy asleep on the couch, Gavin and Miles sneaked away. They went to hang out in Miles' bedroom like two teenagers. Gavin sat sideways on the bed and bounced a little like he was testing it out. He noticed Miles frowning at his phone.

"Is everything OK?"

"My sister is texting to make sure I'm not mad at her. Yesterday she called and worked on me to try to get me to go home for Christmas. We kind of argued. She accused me of not caring, but she cooled off since then, I guess," Miles explained as he texted her back to say everything was peachy.

His conversations with his parents had been exhausting too, with both his mom and dad pretending everything was fine even as Miles exiled himself from all family gatherings that included his grandfather. They asked him to reconsider and join them, but they all knew it was best for everyone concerned if Miles stayed away.

Miles slumped down on the bed next to Gavin. "I didn't have Thanksgiving with my family, and I'm not going to spend Christmas with them either. My homophobic grandfather is going to be there. I'm not going to sit at the same table with him and listen to him telling me that I'm going to burn in Hell. Merry Christmas to me."

"Why isn't he the one being excluded?" Gavin asked.

"A few reasons. His health and also because money talks. My grandfather owns the family business, irrigation equipment sales. Both of my parents work for him. They can't afford to burn that bridge. That's where I was working too before I came to work for you. I just had to get away from my grandfather and his ranting and insults. Couldn't take it any more," Miles said miserably. Gavin put an arm around him and Miles felt his strong fingers squeezed his arm. It was comforting but it also made his heart beat faster.

"Didn't your parents do anything about the way he was treating you?" Gavin wanted to know.

"He saved the worst of it for when they weren't around. It's just as well. They can't afford to piss him off by sticking up for me anyway. There is too much at stake. My grandfather said that when he's ready to retire, he's going to sign over the business to my parents. I don't want to put them in an impossible situation. My mom and dad met working for my grandfather. They gave half their lives to the family business, counting on that promise that the company would be theirs one day. I couldn't stand it if I made them lose everything they worked so hard for." Miles sighed. "To make it easier on myself, I like to think of everyone else as hostages to my grandfather. But that's not really true. They had a choice and they made it. They chose my grandfather and the family business over me. But the way they see it, it's my choice. They invited me and I'm the one boycotting family events to avoid my grandfather."

"Sorry. The silver lining is we get you all to ourselves," Gavin said and pulled him close. "Just know that I'm always here for you if you need to talk."

Miles looked into his kind, blue eyes then let his head drop to Gavin's shoulder. "Thank you," Miles told him in a whisper.

He let himself rest against him, falling into Gavin's arms as they locked around him. Melting into his embrace, Miles sighed. With the reassuring pressure of Gavin's strong arms around him, he could never feel alone. Breathing in his scent and letting his warmth suffuse him, he held on to Gavin as long as he dared. He couldn't get enough of him.

Chapter 15

This was going to be the first Sunday morning that Gavin wouldn't be making his special breakfast for Benji. He had been invited to breakfast and a playdate by two friends from kindergarten, twins Jackie and Joe. The twins' moms had sent Gavin the menu. They were making whole wheat waffles with fresh fruit and whipped yogurt.

"What if you like their breakfast more than mine?" Gavin asked Benji as he drove him over to their house.

Benji shook his head. "I promise I won't," he reassured his dad's fragile ego.

They pulled up in front of the house and Gavin felt a pang of envy. The house wasn't impressive or anything, but it had a nice, big back yard. There was a tree in the back. It looked big enough to support a swing. He could picture him and Benji living in that house, spending summer days in the back yard, Gavin lounging around with a book, Benji running around with a dog he would get him. And as long as he was using his imagination to build his perfect life, why not move Miles in there too.

Actually he had trouble picturing a guy like him in a suburban setting. As he helped Benji out of his car seat and reminded him to be a good guest, Gavin kept wondering what Miles really wanted. On his drive to the bookstore alone with his thoughts, his misgivings came back to him. Did he rush into this, or maybe both of them did? Did Miles just miss his family and that's why he latched onto them?

If Miles needed him, Gavin would do anything for him, but that didn't mean they had to become a couple. The rational part of him was telling him to take a step back, or half a step, or at least put on the brakes until he was sure that they wanted the same thing. He could call Miles and they could talk about it. Or he could call him and ask him to come over to the bookstore. Or ask him to come to his place where they could be alone and no talking would get done because they would be all over each other in seconds.

As he stopped at a red light, Gavin slumped over the steering wheel. The rational part of his mind might be telling him to cool it, but when he was with Miles, he didn't know how to push him away. He was too taken with him, attracted like never before. Miles was so brash and fearless, stepping up to the edge with no fear while Gavin hung back, afraid of everything he felt for him. Every taste he had of Miles only made him want more. From each little moment something bigger threatened to bloom, and then there would be no turning back.

Settling back in his car seat as he parked in front of the bookstore, Gavin sighed. What was Miles doing to him? The same thing he did to

him before, but he didn't dare admit it to himself back them when Miles was younger and an employee. With those barriers down, Miles was now barreling past all the feeble defenses that remained.

With his mind fighting his body and his heart, Gavin walked into the bookstore well before it was time to open. If he kept himself busy, he could keep the wheels from spinning pointlessly. He wasn't getting anywhere trying to untangle his heartstrings from around Miles' finger anyway. Maybe the next time he saw Miles, he would find a way to pull back a little.

Sooner than he expected, Gavin got a chance to test his resolve. While he was reorganizing some shelves, he noticed a familiar figure lingering outside the door of the bookstore. Seeing the closed sign, Miles peered in uncertainly, but he couldn't make out Gavin where he was standing in the shadow of the aisle.

Gavin didn't have to show himself. He could pretend he didn't see Miles either and just let him move on. That was an interesting idea, but his legs were already taking him to the door. Gavin unlocked it and watched Miles' face light up as soon as he laid eyes on him.

"You're visiting early. We aren't even open yet," Gavin said as he let him in.

"I stopped by just on the off chance you were here already. I was going to grab some breakfast while I waited for you to open, but I guess my gamble paid off," Miles said and beamed at him.

"Does that mean you're starving?" Gavin wondered.

"No. I grabbed a coffee and a skinny little slice of toast, but I wouldn't consider that breakfast. Coming here was my priority. I remembered that Sunday mornings were slow, so I thought it was a good time to drop by and get a dose of you. But I expected a dose of Benji too," Miles said when he didn't see him.

"He has a playdate. I'll be picking him up in a few hours when Meredith comes by to relieve me."

"That means we're alone," Miles said and eyed Gavin intently.

"And I was planning to use the alone time productively," Gavin said to try and cool things down a little.

"Me too," Miles said. He gave him a flirtatious smile then followed Gavin to the back of the store. "Should we continue where we left off the last time I was here?"

"I have a few things I need to do," Gavin said and rolled his chair back so he could sit down at his computer. Sitting down with a sigh, he jumped when he felt Miles' hands on his shoulders. "I don't need a massage."

"Who in hell refuses a free massage?" Miles asked and kept rubbing his shoulders.

"Someone who suspects the masseur of ulterior motives," Gavin told him. But as Miles kneaded the muscles at the base of his neck, he groaned.

"Guilty," Miles admitted. "My ulterior motive is the same as always – I want to get into your good graces."

"Letting me work might do the trick," Gavin said but he still leaned back and rested his head against Miles' middle. He couldn't seem to help himself. He craved more contact. With effort he snapped out of it and pulled away, rolling his chair forward. Breathing deep and clenching his fists, Gavin tried to shut down his need for Miles.

"Sorry," Miles said, noticing the change of mood. "You seemed a little tense. But now you seem even more tense. I guess that's my fault. I didn't mean to bug you."

"Don't worry about it. I'm just busy," Gavin lied without raising his eyes to look at Miles who now stood to one side of him. In Gavin's peripheral vision, he was only an indistinct shape. It was better that way. If he didn't face him and see him clearly, it would be easier to send him away.

Looking to the side rather than at Miles, Gavin saw Benji grinning at him from a photo on his desk, a reminder of what was at stake. Keep that little boy happy at all costs, he told himself. Before now, Gavin didn't find it hard to deny himself, but that was only because he never wanted anyone as much as he wanted Miles.

Finding just enough strength inside him to tell Miles he wouldn't have any time for him today, Gavin turned toward him. Then he stopped. Miles looked so resigned, waiting there with sad eyes, but composed, like he was always ready for the ax to fall.

Gavin's breath hitched in his throat and the words died on his lips. He swallowed down what he was about to say and came out with a bland excuse. "There are a few things I like to do first thing. You're not bothering me."

One forlorn glance and Gavin broke down. Now Miles' expression turned slightly more hopeful but still cautious. "Something is bothering you. If it's not me..."

"It's us," Gavin confessed. "You bailed on me once. This time the stakes are so much higher."

Miles bristled at the accusation. "Leaving a job is one thing. Leaving you and Benji is... It's..." he stammered then recovered himself. "It's unthinkable."

"It is for me too," Gavin told him. "I mean, I'm so used to you now."

"Used to me?" Miles asked, indignant.

Gavin couldn't deny that it was more than that. "OK. Maybe not just used to you." But he couldn't forget his fears. "It's not only me any more. If you should turn tail and run..."

Miles shook his head as he interrupted. "That's funny. My biggest fear is that you are going to dump me. The last thing on my mind is running off when I finally have a chance with you. I'm going to hold on for dear life."

Gavin only stared at him. Why did those words mean so much to him? Whenever Miles spoke from his heart, the words touched him, made him want to enfold him in his arms.

"Aha, you like the sound of that," Miles accused him, his brown-eyed gaze mischievous. "You can't hide that twinkle in your eyes."

"My eyes don't twinkle," Gavin said, and stood up to try and hide his embarrassment.

"True. They smolder," Miles said in all seriousness then got in his way as he attempted to create some distance between them.

As Miles pressed himself against him, Gavin tried not to think of him sitting on top of him with Gavin's cock deep inside him. Miles was flushed, rising slowly off his hips, both of them moaning at the dragging sensation... No, he had to stop that. Gavin took a shuddering breath. What he wouldn't give to have him right now. Anything. And Miles was right there, ready to give himself. Gavin was the one standing in his own way.

Composing himself with visible effort, Gavin got ready to set some ground rules. "OK. This is what's going to happen. I'm going to go lock the door," Gavin said and took a key from his pocket and tossed it to Miles. "You dig around in the bottom drawer of my desk. Be right back."

Miles looked at the key he had caught in his hand and then followed Gavin with his eyes. Once he was gone, Gavin pictured him going over to the desk. From out in front, Gavin heard him unlock the drawer just as he turned the lock on the front door of the store. Miles must have been rummaging around until he had condoms and a bottle of lube in his hand. Then he might have heard Gavin's footsteps coming closer.

When Gavin stood in the doorway to the back of the store, Miles turned. Closing in on him, Gavin eyed him like Miles was his prey, but it was Miles who pounced and tackled Gavin to the couch.

They barely stayed on it as they kissed and groped with violent urgency. Kissing and grinding, they struggled to get each other's jeans undone. Miles managed to unzip Gavin's fly, get his hand inside somehow and grab hold of his cock. While he pumped it with his fist, Miles demanded, "You have to fuck me right now."

"This couch is too small. I'm not a damn contortionist, Miles," Gavin protested.

"But I fantasized about doing it right here," Miles breathed.

"Really?"

"Yes. I've been dreaming about this since the day I met you."

Hearing that, how could Gavin deny him? "OK, but one of us better be a contortionist," Gavin said while breathing hard and unbuttoning Miles' jeans. He took his boxers down to free his cock. He did the same to his own. Leaning down, he took Miles in his mouth and sucked. At the same time he hurriedly pulled the jeans and boxers off Miles' ass. Pulling off his beautiful cock, Gavin took hold of his legs and lifted them up.

"I guess we'll find out how flexible I am," Miles panted as his legs got folded into his chest.

Miles' legs propped up on his shoulders, Gavin traced a path to his hole with two lubed fingers. His fingers pushing in set off a string of curses and then a long deep moan from Miles. A few more thrusts and Gavin could tell that Miles wouldn't be able take anther second of fingering.

Miles confirmed it. "Stop it or else," he gasped, his voice coming out harsh between gritted teeth.

Gavin stopped and moved up his body. He came to lean over Miles and leered down at him. As Gavin lowered himself to rest against him, he let him feel the solid weight of his body on top of him. Just that made Miles moan. Miles clutched at him, but Gavin needed him even closer. He needed to be deep inside him.

A hard kiss, the condom rolled on, he positioned himself as best he could on the small couch. Blood rushed in his ears as he drove his cock into an impossibly tight heat. Wracked with shuddering breaths as he was penetrated, Miles looked up into his eyes. A slow determined shove ended with Gavin deep inside him and Miles arching his back, hanging on to Gavin's rock hard thighs and whimpering. Gavin paused and let Miles' body pulse around him.

Gavin loved the tight fit of his cock inside him. He couldn't get enough and he started thrusting. There was no denying that he took pleasure in knowing he was the only one who had ever fucked Miles. Now he was losing himself in his eyes and he had to kiss those parted lips. Though it wasn't easy, he leaned down to kiss him. The move broke his rhythm and he stopped. Miles looked mad and kind of desperate.

"Let's try something else," Gavin told him as he got off him. "Turn over."

Gavin didn't wait for him to gather his wits or get himself under control. Hurriedly he helped Miles to his feet. After a kiss, he turned him around and guided him into position, head down ass up, one knee on the couch to open him up. To the sound of Miles moaning, he drove his cock back inside him with deliberate slowness.

"Fuck," Miles gasped as Gavin filled him up again with a grunt.

Gavin felt Miles' legs buckled under him. His whole body was

shaking even before Gavin started pounding him in earnest, plunging deep and hard while picking up speed all the time. Ferocious in his passion, Gavin was pumping in and out of him with all his power, losing himself in Miles.

Muscles tensing with each thrust, Gavin worked his body relentlessly until he couldn't take any more. Every cell in his entire being screamed for release. Pounding his way to an incredible orgasm, he felt Miles body constrict around him. He was coming and taking Gavin with him too. Like a bolt of lightning, an intense orgasm shot through him.

That's when Miles almost collapsed to the couch streaked with his come and Gavin caught him. "What have you done to me?" Gavin growled in his ear.

Miles leaned his back into his chest and told him, "Right back at you. That was insanely good."

Gavin kissed his neck then realized they had to clean up. He was coming to his senses but not completely. He would never be entirely sane again. As he stood by the cleaned up couch and stared off into space, Gavin felt strong fingers entwine with his and Miles came to stand in front of him. Gavin brought him close, inches apart then closer until their foreheads touched. Slowly their faces tilted up and their mouths joined in a soft kiss.

"I'm either going insane or falling in love with you," he told Miles as soon as their mouths parted.

"Yes! I win!" Miles said and did a fist pump.

"This is your reaction?"

"No. This is," Miles told him and wrapped himself around him for a thorough kiss. "I'm so crazy about you and I'm all in," he vowed after he let Gavin breathe.

Gavin smiled. "I guess I was hoping to hear that. I might be afraid, but I want you to stick around more than anything."

Once Miles left, Gavin opened the store and tried to act like a responsible adult. He had been so overcome. The force of his own desire proved to be too much for him. His need for Miles was almost painful. And he just had him. If sex didn't satisfy his need, what the hell would? Even though his body might be satisfied, the rest of him still wanted Miles insanely, desperately, more than he wanted anyone ever before.

Chapter 16

When he first bought the bookstore, Gavin got to enjoy a lot of peaceful hours, especially in the mornings. He didn't miss those days at all. Now he had a lot more customers, especially so close to the holidays. And Miles dropped by whenever he got the chance. But even on the days when he knew Miles was busy, Gavin still looked toward the door eagerly, hoping that he might somehow find the time to visit.

How eagerly he waited for Miles, the way he couldn't help glancing at the door every time it chimed, it was embarrassing. Once again Gavin turned to the door at the sound of the chime and saw Bruce standing there.

"I bet you were hoping for someone else to drop in on you," Bruce accused him.

Gavin didn't bother pretending he didn't know who he was talking about. "He's at work."

"I'm happy for you even if you are leaving me to be single all by myself. But you weren't even dating for a while there, so I don't begrudge you this stroke of luck," Bruce said while he idly looked over a few books then came to lean by the register.

"There may have been a dry spell," Gavin admitted grudgingly.

"So what happened to him being too young?" Bruce asked.

"He is a little older now, and I guess he must be worth the risk, because I've already taken things too far to sweep this thing under the rug," Gavin confessed. "Any day now I'll be telling Benji that Miles and I are boyfriends." He hardly dared to say the word.

"Your little nerd man should be happy," Bruce pointed out. "From what I saw, he likes your new guy."

"Miles is easy to like," Gavin said with a smile. "I just wish he was a little older, more settled."

"No way. A waspy, straitlaced guy like you needs a sweet, young thing to get his blood pumping," Bruce told him. "And to show you what a good friend I am, how about if Marvin and I host your little guy for a sleepover. That way you and Miles can go at it all night long."

Gavin couldn't resist an offer like that. "I think I'll take you up on that. Thank you," he told Bruce. "I'll owe you."

"It's for a good cause. Do me proud. Make an unholy mess of each other."

After Bruce went on his way, Gavin was left to wonder what he had gotten himself into. He was just letting things happen and Bruce was an enabler without a doubt. But maybe Gavin did need a little push.

His attempts at relationships had always been halfhearted. He was always ready to pull the ripcord and parachute out. That was before he got Benji. His little boy was the reason he should have been even more hesitant now. So what was he doing taking a chance on someone like Miles? And the way Benji took to him, that was both terrifying and wonderful.

When it came to Miles, Gavin didn't know how to let go. He would miss his loving touch, his laughing eyes, his sad smiles when he talked about his family, his persistence, and his easy rapport with Benji. He would miss Miles so much. He knew it would be unbearable.

If he lost Miles now, Gavin knew he would fall apart, and that scared him. That was unacceptable now that he was a dad. He would just have to make sure that nothing tore them apart.

When Gavin brought Benji to the store after kindergarten, he saw that he wasn't the only one who couldn't go a day without seeing Miles. Gavin wasn't expecting him for a while, but Benji was impatient for him to come over. Benji was sitting at the kids' table, his homework already done, eagerly looking toward the door and waiting for Miles to show up.

"Miles is late," Benji complained like he thought they had a standing, after school appointment.

"I told you he wouldn't be stopping by until later," Gavin reminded him.

"But we're homework buddies, and he isn't here. I had to do my homework all by myself." Benji put his head down on the table on top of his crossed arms and sighed, but as soon as he heard the door chime, he sat up straight to see who it was.

One look at Benji's face and there was no doubt who was coming through that door. He was beyond happy that Miles had finally arrived. Seeing Miles had put a goofy smile on Benji's face, but then he got serious again.

"You're late," he told Miles as he approached the little kids' table.

"Sorry. I was at a special lecture. That's like a class," Miles tried to explain as he kneeled down next to him and got his book bag off his shoulder.

"I was in class too. I'm not late," Benji said, deadly serious.

Since his excuse wasn't good enough, Miles tried again. "OK. Sorry. But my classes are farther away."

Benji tilted his head as he carefully considered if Miles should be forgiven. Finally he said, "OK. But I already did my homework without you."

"Too bad. What if we read something together?" Miles said and got a fat textbook out of his bag.

"You have to do your homework before reading," Benji told him.

Miles looked over at Gavin, recognizing one of his rules. "Reading is my homework. You can keep me company and read something too," he said to Benji.

Benji turned to Gavin to see if any rules were being broken. After he got the OK from Gavin, Benji opened up a book on his lap and scooted over to sit close to Miles.

"Thanks, Benji. You're one cool guy," Miles told him.

"Dad! I'm a cool guy," Benji said, spinning around to share the news.

"Of course you are," Gavin agreed.

"Is Dad a cool guy?" Benji asked Miles like he was some kind of authority on who was cool and who wasn't.

Miles looked Gavin over with a thoughtful frown. "Hmmm. He's OK," was Miles' verdict.

"Dad, you're OK," Benji informed him.

"I guess I'll have to be satisfied with that," Gavin said, but as soon as Benji ran off to go to the bathroom, he complained to Miles. "Would it have killed you to say I was cool?"

"Since when are you trying for cool? Someone gave you the name Gavin. Clearly you come from a long line of uptight people," Miles pointed out.

Gavin gave up and went over to tell Miles his news. "Bruce stopped by to invite Benji for a sleepover at their place tomorrow." He was going to say more, but Miles jumped in with a demand.

"No fair. I want a sleepover too," Miles said.

"I was getting to that. Tomorrow night you can have your sleepover as well as a home cooked meal. Will that satisfy you?" Gavin asked.

"Not quite. But what comes after that might do the trick," Miles said with a suggestive grin. He stood up off the floor and came up to Gavin to try and steal a kiss.

"Save it for tomorrow," Gavin warned him and put up a hand to stop him. His hand ended up pressed to Miles' chest. Miles took advantage of that. He grabbed hold of it and wouldn't let go. "Cool it. I still need to tell Benji. He loves staying at Bruce's. He gets to play with Marvin and Fuzzy. Full name Fuzzy Wuzzy."

"As I recall, Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear," Miles said.

"This one is a dog, a curly haired little mutt. Benji adores him."

"A dog?" Miles frowned in concentration and tapped his forehead. "I remember now. You promised Benji that he would get a dog one day. Get that child a dog pronto."

"A dog in our apartment, which doesn't even have a proper balcony, when both Benji and I stay at the store practically all day. I don't think so. The guilt would eat me alive. When I get a house, I'll get two dogs and they can keep each other company."

"Ambitious," Miles said, impressed by his grand plan.

"It's something to strive for," Gavin said. He didn't mention that when he pictured owning a house, it wasn't just him, Benji and two dogs. Now he pictured Miles there right alongside him. It was an irresistible image that made it impossible to deny how much he wanted Miles in his life.

Chapter 17

To pass the time on the evening he was going over to Gavin's for their date, Miles went by Candice's place. She had a date too and she was sitting at her makeup mirror, getting ready. As she applied mascara then blinked a few times, she told him, "Grab yourself a drink, but don't drink my last diet tonic water."

"Why would I want to?" Miles said. He went to her fridge to grab himself something that was actually drinkable and found a diet Sprite.

With the can of Sprite in his hand, Miles sat on the edge of Candice's bed and watched her put on makeup. It reminded him of watching his mom getting ready. When he was little, it made him feel close to her, like he was being let in on some secret. But it had been years since he felt close to anyone in his family.

Since becoming friends with Candice, Miles had seen the protracted, hair and makeup ritual countless times. She took high maintenance to a whole new level. When Miles first met her, he didn't think even for one second that they could be friends. He was scruffy. She was perfectly put together, like she was always ready to go straight into the pages of a fashion magazine. The one time he saw her looking low maintenance, it turned out she had food poisoning and he had to hold her hair while she threw up everything she ever ate. That was the day their friendship was cast in stone.

She told him, "You kept throw-up out of my hair. We are friends for life."

Her hair was long, sable colored and impossibly shiny. It swayed down her back as she checked herself in the mirror. Her little black dress, or date uniform, fit her to perfection. When she was all dressed up like that, she looked like someone whose name everyone should know.

She turned to Miles. "Tell me I look stunning."

Miles tilted his head and frowned critically. "You look OK," he said to tease her.

"You want to be wearing that Sprite?" she asked him.

In self-defense, he quickly downed the last of it and crushed the can. "You know you look great. You didn't even need to go to all that trouble."

"Dating is war, and makeup is my armor. I only let people I like see me without it. And I don't know if I like this guy yet."

"In that case, I feel privileged," Miles said and bowed in front of her as he stood up and went to throw the soda can in the recycling bin.

Ready to go, Candice was getting together the few things that would fit in her tiny purse after she put her phone in there. "We're meeting at

Cafe Rombo. Expensive, but I'm worth it. I just don't know about him. I met him at Frida's party. He looks good in clothes. I'm still debating if I need to know what he looks like out of them, or if I would rather that remained a mystery," Candice told him as she checked herself one final time in the mirror by her front door.

"Sounds promising," Miles said sarcastically. He couldn't imagine being so undecided about a guy. But then his feelings for Gavin were like a punch to the gut, no indecision, just hopeless longing since the day he met him.

"And what about you and your guy?" she asked like she knew that's where his mind had gone.

"I'm not on the fence. I definitely want to rip his clothes off," Miles told her.

"With a kid around, isn't it hard for you guys to go off and enjoy each other's manliness?" Candice asked.

"You have a way of putting things. We find time, like tonight for example. And that's the reason I go over to the bookstore whenever I get the chance."

"Still, a guy with a kid. That's just a bunch of extra work. You should be more pragmatic like me," she told him.

"You're pragmatic now because no one has grabbed you by the heart."

She looked at him like he had said something terrible. "You better be wrong about that. If I get all gooey and marshmallowy like you..." she started to say but Miles interrupted.

"Oh. Thanks for reminding me. I need to get a pack of those marshmallow snow-dudes for Benji as stocking stuffers."

Candice pointed a long, festively painted fingernail at his face. "Listen to you. This is what I'm talking about."

"And thank you for talking about it. This way I won't forget to get them before they're all gone." Standing by her front door, they were both ready to go, so he asked her, "You want me to walk you to that café."

"You mean as a chaperone?"

"I could eyeball your guy menacingly, put him on notice." Miles gave her his best tough guy look.

"You are too sweet, but I like to do my own eyeballing and menacing." She batted her long eyelashes at him.

"True. You are scarier," he told her and then quickly ducked out of range so she couldn't hit him with her tiny purse.

Going outside into the cold of the evening, Miles pulled his jacket closer around him. Icy sidewalks, bare trees, a bone chilling damp in the air, it should have been a dismal time of the year, but Miles was

the happiest he had ever been all thanks to Gavin and Benji.

As he passed a hot dog cart, the intoxicating smell of hot dogs cooking forced him to veer off in that direction. The guy rubbing his hands by the hot dog cart smiled at him as if to say, "I know you want one, big boy."

Miles did want one but he didn't want to spoil his appetite. Gavin was cooking for him tonight, so Miles moved on to the sound of his stomach growling.

He was hungry, chilled and happy by the time he arrived on Gavin's doorstep. "Hi, beautiful," Miles said to Gavin as soon as he opened the door to him.

Gavin didn't accept the compliment just shook his head and tried to throw it back at Miles. "That's my line."

As he stepped over the threshold, Miles leaned in for a kiss hello. Then he threw his arms around him and kept him from being able to close the door.

"Excuse me," Gavin said pointedly while restrained in his embrace.

"Don't let your guard down around me if you don't want to get steamrolled," Miles told him then stayed plastered against him.

"Let's get inside so I can cook you something," Gavin said knowing that the mention of food would get him released.

It worked. Miles followed Gavin into the kitchen. Opening the fridge, Gavin took out what he needed for the dinner he planned to cook. While Gavin moved around the kitchen getting ingredients and pots and pans, Miles felt no need to give him any extra room. In fact Miles made a point of crowding him as much as possible.

"I guess cooking is a full contact sport to you," Gavin said.

"I just want to be close in case you need a hand," Miles said and brushed a hand over his back and down to his ass.

"Yes. Very helpful," Gavin said with a grin. "Go get me one more egg."

Miles left Gavin alone reluctantly for the few seconds it took to get the egg. Then he was back to it. Sneaking over to Gavin at the stove, he stepped right behind him and encircled his waist with his arms. Kissing the back of his neck, Miles settled against him with a sigh. He didn't care if Gavin was immobilized.

"So this is how you help me out? It's like I'm in a straitjacket."

"You love it," Miles said but he did loosen his hold a little so he could do the all-important cooking. With great interest, he watched Gavin work.

He cracked the eggs into a bowl then whisked them with a fork. He then set up two other bowls, one with flour the other with Italian breadcrumbs.

When he mixed shredded parmesan into the Italian bread crumbs,

Miles asked him, "Don't those breadcrumbs already have parmesan?" Miles picked up the package to check.

"I want extra," Gavin told him after giving him an amused look.

"I'm all for extra everything." The next step had Miles asking questions too. "You're cutting the chicken then breading it?"

Gavin was cutting the chicken into strips before dipping them in flower, egg then the breadcrumbs. "I want smaller, crispy bites. I'll fry them. They'll get crispy then they go into the pasta along with the roasted vegetables."

"Damn. You're killing me here," Miles said when they went into the frying oil and he smelled the savory breading starting to sizzle.

"I came up with this recipe just for you," Gavin said and smiled shyly. "I thought this was something you might like."

"You came up with this dish just for me? You are amazing," Miles said, touched by the gesture more than he could say, especially since it involved food. He hugged Gavin as fiercely as he could and kissed him. "I bet you weren't expecting to get attacked for it," Miles said when he let him go so the food wouldn't burn.

"Actually I was hoping to get attacked," Gavin said with a wicked look in his eyes.

Since he asked, Miles obliged him with another kiss. He couldn't keep that up if he ever wanted to eat though, so he mainly fondled Gavin while he cooked. The muscles of his shoulders and back shifting under Miles' hands as he felt up Gavin while he worked. A casual stroke here and there didn't impede him too much as he got the pot ready to boil pasta.

"What's this weird pasta called?" Miles asked while they waited for the water for the pasta to come to a boil.

Gavin picked up the bag to read the name. "It's trotolle."

"I would be more impressed if you didn't have to read it off the bag." Miles didn't think watching water boil was a good use of his time though. "I know how I can give you some space while the pasta boils. I need to steal stuff off your computer," he told Gavin. He needed to print up some pictures and put them in the photo album he got him as a Christmas gift.

"You will find surprisingly little porn on there," Gavin said, misunderstanding his intentions completely.

"For once in my life that is not what I'm after," Miles told him. With his permission, he printed up some pictures. It was fun picking out just the right photos, but Miles hoped he wasn't giving away the surprise completely.

"Would you like some wine?" Gavin asked him when he got back.

"Only if you want to watch me trying to pretend I like it."

"I can do without that," Gavin said.

While Miles was gone, things in the kitchen had progressed. Gavin had a big bowl out and he was putting the meal together.

"No sauce?" Miles said when he saw the vegetables and the chicken go into the pasta.

"Doesn't need it. You'll see," Gavin assured him. He was confident in what he was doing even as Miles bombarded him with questions at every turn.

"You obviously know what you're doing. I don't mean to question you," Miles said. He didn't want Gavin to think he was doubting his cooking skills. He was just curious.

"I don't mind."

He mixed some shredded parmesan into the pasta. Once pasta was served, he shaved off paper thin slices of parmesan and set them on top of the pasta on each plate. Miles watched the slivers curl from the heat.

"You aren't kidding around, are you? This is a thing of beauty," Miles said, impressed. He couldn't wait to get started. As he sat down, he grinned at Gavin. He really was incredible.

He was even more taken with him after he had a few bites of pasta. The breaded pieces of chicken were extra crispy. The roasted veggies were yummy all by themselves. If he didn't have to praise the chef, Miles wouldn't have stopped eating until he cleared his plate.

"You rule. If I wasn't already in love with you, this would do it," he told Gavin.

"In love?"

Miles realized this was the first time he had said the word. He was bound to blurt it out sooner or later. Even if he didn't mean to say it right then, now that it was out there, he wasn't about to take it back. "What? You cook this kind of thing for guys who aren't in love with you?" he challenged Gavin.

"You scare me," Gavin said while staring at him like he was afraid to blink. He had raised a forkful of food halfway to his mouth. Now he stood frozen and Miles got worried.

"In a good way, right?"

Gavin set his fork down and stood up from his chair. "In the best way," he said and came over to pull Miles up from his chair so he could kiss him.

Chapter 18

With dinner dishes in the dishwasher, Miles was helping Gavin with the pots and pans. Gavin was just going to leave them and do them himself later, but Miles insisted on pitching in.

"It's only fair after that amazing food you made. I can't cook much so I want to contribute what I can."

"You mean other than groping?" Gavin asked.

Miles had an excuse, sort of. "I couldn't help it. It's so rare that I get you all to myself with no threat of interruptions. It was really nice of Bruce to do this."

"I'm sure we'll get to repay him the next time he has a hot date. According to him, he still owes me. He's always saying that he has Marvin all thanks to me," Gavin said.

"Why thanks to you?" Miles asked as he dried the frying pan.

"He decided to adopt right when I did," Gavin said.

"Copycat," Miles said.

"Bruce was afraid that the whole thing would fall through somewhere between filling out forms, lawyers, and all the red tape. So I was his canary in a coalmine. I was worried too, but once I took the steps, Bruce could do it too and Marvin got himself a pretty great dad."

"That worked out well for everyone," Miles said. He was happy for all of them.

"I envy Bruce though. He has a mom and a sister who dote on Marvin. I wish I had more of a family for Benji to join," Gavin said as they finished up in the kitchen and went to sit in the living room.

"You're more than enough. Trust me, with family it's quality over quantity," Miles told him, taking a seat so they faced each other on the couch. "What is the deal with your family? You never talk about them."

"I don't really have a family any more. When I came out, the man I thought was my father told me I wasn't his son. He meant it literally. My mom had a one night stand and that's how I was conceived. Mom was already pregnant when she got married. Nick agreed to raise me as his son, but that all went out the window when he found out I was gay. My mom died six years ago. After that, I didn't have a family any more. Until I got Benji," Gavin said and looked at one of the many photos of his son.

"As families go, Benji is pretty great all by himself," Miles said. He put an arm around Gavin's shoulders as they both looked at a picture of Benji hugging a balloon that said happy birthday.

"Yes, he is incredible. I wish my mom had gotten to meet him,"

Gavin said, his voice tinged with pain. "We had kind of a strained relationship, her loyalties divided between me and Nick. When I confronted my mom and asked her why she lied about Nick being my dad, she said, 'I didn't think it was a lie. He said he would be your dad.' I guess he forgot to mention that he had a few conditions, 'I'll be his dad as long as he doesn't turn out to be gay one day.'"

"Sorry. That's terrible." Miles' own parents didn't go that far.

"He disowned me, and I tell myself that I can disown him right back. Make it so he's now just Nick to me, not my dad, not anyone's. But I can't take back every time over years of growing up when I called him Dad without a single doubt in my mind that that's who he was and always would be," Gavin said sadly and Miles took him in his arms. Gavin sighed against him. "I think that's why I had so much trouble with relationships, even when it came to trusting you. This insidious fear was always creeping up on me – that things weren't as they seemed. That I would give my heart to someone and then be discarded, abandoned, told 'You are nothing to me.'"

"I'll never do that," Miles promised him and buried his face in his neck.

Gavin rubbed his back and murmured thank you into Miles hair. His hand moved up to the back of Miles head, fingers threading through his hair. Miles tilted his head back and looked into yearning blue eyes that mirrored his own desire perfectly.

Leaning in for a kiss Miles brushed his lips over Gavin's softly like an invitation for him to dive in. Gavin took him up on it. His hand firmly on the back of Miles neck, Gavin kissed him deep so that he felt it down to his toes.

Miles hooked his arms around him holding on as hard as he could, too hard even but Gavin didn't seem to mind. He returned Miles tight embrace matching his intensity as they kissed. When they pulled apart, Gavin took Miles hands in his and stood up.

Keeping hold of his hands, Gavin pulled him up to his feet, ready to lead him to his bedroom. Miles couldn't wait though. He threw his arms around him and kissed him with abandon, ready to be taken right there. Gavin didn't go along with that. Maybe he didn't like the hard floor.

Kissing the whole time, he enticed Miles to his bedroom by backing out of the living room. Miles stayed right with him as they bumped into things since neither one of them could steer while kissing and groping each other.

Going through his bedroom door, Gavin kicked the door closed just before Miles tackled him into it. Grunting low in his ear and grinding against him, Miles was insatiable. He wanted Gavin right now, anywhere he could get him.

"Slow down," Gavin told him breathlessly.

"I want you too much to slow down," Miles growled.

"What if I promise you that we have time?" Gavin said.

Finally Miles stopped rubbing up against him and bit his lower lip. "I like the sound of that."

Stepping against him, Gavin pushed him backwards toward the bed. His mouth was on Miles' until he had him where he wanted him. Then Gavin pushed him down on the bed and started undressing him before he could even catch his breath. Miles was gasping and cursing as he kicked away his jeans and boxers all while trying to get Gavin naked too.

He managed it somehow and then just stared at him, overcome. Long limbs, tight muscles and those blue eyes full of lust – there wasn't a more beautiful sight. Gavin didn't let him enjoy the simple pleasure of gazing at him in admiration. Not that Miles could ever get enough.

Gavin got on top of him and let him feel the full weight of his body only for a moment then moved down letting his body slide over Miles'. His lips traveled down from Miles' mouth, over his throat to his chest. The whole time, Gavin's hands caressed and skimmed up and down Miles body, teasing him, stoking his need for more.

Gavin's lips found his nipple and Miles felt warm breath heating sensitive skin. Taking each of Miles' nipples between his teeth in turn then teasing them with his tongue, Gavin made him shiver and arch his back, dying to give himself to him. But that wasn't happening yet so Miles had to satisfy himself by groping Gavin. Raking his hands down his back, Miles dug his fingers into his perfect, tight ass while begging, "Gavin, please."

Miles' voice was raw with unbearable need for Gavin, but he wasn't moved by his pleading. Gavin continued to torture his flesh. From one nipple to the other, his licks and kisses ranged all over Miles' chest and then down. Gavin lapped at the head of his cock while his hand stroked the shaft lightly. The whole time Miles whimpered and cursed, demanding to be fucked.

With Gavin touching him everywhere, Miles was breaking into a million pieces, dying for it and Gavin was damn sadist for not letting him have it. Finally he gave Miles a soft kiss on the lips. While hovering over him, Gavin whispered, "Ready?"

Miles glared at him and in response Gavin smiled confidently down at him. He knew he had Miles right where he wanted him – well past ready, aching for him, beyond desperate. Gavin leaned across Miles to reach for the condoms and lube on the bedside table and got groped for his trouble.

Miles parted his legs and Gavin kneeled between them. Raising one of Miles' legs up and out of the way, Gavin settled his foot on his

shoulder. He pressed a kiss to Miles ankle and then slid his fingertips over his calf and up his inner thigh.

Between his own moans, Miles heard him uncap the lube and started breathing hard. He knew now what Gavin's cock felt like inside him. Just the thought of it made him crazy with the need to have Gavin inside him again.

First he took his fingers inside him and gasped. Arousal was roiling through him, driving him wild while Gavin primed him for what was to come. Lying there, staring up appreciatively at Gavin's cock, Miles didn't want to come yet.

Watching Gavin roll on a condom, he put his arms up to anchor himself on the headboard. As Gavin got into position, Miles felt his hands on his ass then the pressure of his cock. The experience of being opened up by that cock was like nothing else. Gavin was taking him and joining with him, and it made Miles want to cry and laugh and give his soul to this man.

The slow push ended with Gavin deep inside him and Miles panting his name and biting his shoulder. Gavin rose above him and pumped in and out to the sound of Miles' moans. He slowed his thrusts. With a heavy, possessive grip, his hands went to Miles' shoulders then moved over his arms, sliding down until he held both of Miles' hands in his. Entwining their fingers, Gavin pushed his hands up. Now their hands were linked together above Miles' head, and Gavin was kissing him and fucking him slowly.

After what seemed like forever, the delicious torture left Miles a quivering mess and Gavin switched gears. Taking Miles' legs off his shoulder, he took hold of his ankles. Now he was pounding him and Miles cursed in gratitude. With Miles urging him on, Gavin's relentless thrusts filled him with unbearable pleasure.

Hardly slowing down, Gavin shifted positions again. Letting Miles anchor his legs against his shoulders, Gavin moved his fingertips down his body. He timed the first stroke of Miles' cock with a deep, hard thrust inside him. And still somehow Miles didn't come, but damn he was close.

The circle of Gavin's long fingers tightening around his shaft then moved up and down in an urgent rhythm to match the hammering he was giving Miles. Arching up for more, Miles was lost to the searing pleasure that flooded his senses. Gavin was close too. They moved together, coming together hard, moaning loud and long.

Afterward, Miles was so high from that fuck, he thought he would never come down. Gavin's kiss brought him back to reality. "You were incredible," Gavin said but the words should have come from Miles' own lips. If only he could speak. He was still breathless and dazed as Gavin covered him up and settled next to him in bed.

Blinking at the ceiling Miles turned to find Gavin gazing at him with a soft smile on his lips. Miles turned over to rest halfway on top of Gavin, with an arm and a leg thrown over him. "You're so good to me," he mumbled into his chest while Gavin stroked his hair. Soon he was drifting off feeling sore, happy and perfectly fulfilled.

Chapter 19

As soon as Gavin opened his eyes with Miles snoring next to him, memories started washing over him – Miles under him, calling his name, thrusting up for more, his eyes blazing with passion. He was like some lurid dream of an incredible lover, except he was right beside him sleeping peacefully in this bed. Somehow even a whole night spent with Miles snoring next to him was more like some unimaginable bliss than anything real. But there he was.

Gavin reached for his phone and ended up disturbing Miles, who stopped snoring and made a complaining noise. "Sorry," Gavin whispered and kissed his temple lightly, hoping to let him sleep a little longer.

As he checked his phone, Gavin found no new messages from Bruce. That's all he cared about right now. Everything else could wait. Waking up only a little and snuggling closer, Miles threw an arm over him and gave him a quick, sleepy kiss.

It seemed like Miles was ready to go back to sleep with his arm over Gavin's chest. Gavin wasn't having it. He kissed Miles gently and felt him come alive against him. With Miles slowly coming awake, Gavin put his arm around him to draw him closer.

Miles shifted too, pressing his hard-on into Gavin's hip. Miles' fingers tickled his side with a light caress, traced along his ribcage then circled his navel in a teasing dance as his hand made its way to his cock. Brushing his lips over Gavin's shoulder then his throat, Miles took hold of Gavin's arm and pushed it down, putting his hand closer to his hard cock.

"You're nice to wake up next to," Miles mumbled sleepily.

"You're only saying that because I have my hand on your cock," Gavin said as he leaned over him.

"It's one of the reasons," Miles said and opened his bright eyes to look up at him.

He smiled then suddenly he pushed Gavin down so that he was lying on top of him. Face to face with him, Miles came in for a deep, long kiss. Gavin's hands slipped down his back to his ass. Ending the kiss with a moan, Miles said his name urgently and Gavin shuddered. His voice sexy and raw, his lips brushing over Gavin's earlobe, Miles whispered, "I have to have you."

With Miles hard cock pressing into him, Gavin couldn't make any kind of pretest. He couldn't even think the word no.

"We have to make it quick," Gavin said and Miles rewarded him with a soft kiss. Feeling Miles' tongue slide against his own, Gavin kissed him harder.

"I'll give you a two for one deal," Miles said as he took Gavin's cock in his hand. With his other hand, he did the same to his own. Watching Miles hands working their cocks with the same smooth, gentle motion, Gavin was mesmerized. He was dying to flip him over, push him down and suck him off for all he was worth. Wrapping his lips around his cock would have to wait. Miles had his own plan.

He got closer, right up against him so their cocks aligned. Miles gave him a thorough kiss then he got to work. He took hold of both their cocks and stroked them together.

"You have time for this?" he asked now that his hand was busy on Gavin's cock, making only one answer possible.

Gavin gave him a curt "Yes" between gritted teeth followed by a hungry kiss.

He moaned as Miles squeezed gently then moved his hand up and down their cocks with more urgency and pressure. They were kissing with abandon as Gavin let his hands roam Miles' body. Miles' long fingers couldn't close around both of their cocks. Thrusting his hips, Miles made them rub together and through his cupped fist.

In no time, Miles had them both satisfied. "I love making you come," he said as they cleaned each other up.

"Same here," Gavin said. "If it was up to me, I would never let you leave this bed." He wanted to say more but first he had to kiss Miles. And then he got worried about time. "We better get moving so I can pick up Benji."

Miles smiled as soon as his name was mentioned. "You know it's amazing how much I love that kid considering how often he's cock blocking me," Miles said and swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

Raising his arms over his head, Miles stretched and Gavin watched him with a smile, admiring the play of muscles and the perfect curve of his ass. He placed his hands flat on his back then moved them over his sides to clasp in the middle of his chest. Leaning with his ear pressed between his shoulder blades, he wanted to hear Miles' heart. After listening for a while to the strong, steady beat, he turned his head and placed a kiss on Miles' warm skin.

"Let me get cleaned up properly so you can pick up that kid of yours," Miles told him and turned to give his a stern look and a quick kiss before he stood up next to the bed.

"Since when are you the responsible one?" Gavin asked him and got out of bed as well.

For a moment Miles leaned his face on his shoulder and Gavin barely heard his mumbled response. He felt it in the movement of his lips against his shoulder and the heat of his breath. As he watched him go into the bathroom, Gavin replayed his words in his head.

Miles had told him, "It's because of you. I want to be good and do

everything right so you'll love me."

Gavin almost grabbed his arm to stop him and tell him he already did. He had been on the verge of saying it so many times but always held back. Going into the kitchen to start the coffee for Miles and tea for himself, Gavin wondered what he was waiting for.

A little later, Miles showed up dressed, his hair damp from the quick shower he took. With bleary eyes, he blinked at the coffeemaker, which had fresh coffee in it.

"I love you so much," Miles said with heartfelt sincerity.

Gavin was halfway to saying it back when he realized Miles wasn't speaking to him. "I take it you're talking to the coffee."

"I might have some love left over for whoever made it," Miles told him as he nudged Gavin and poured himself a cup.

"Is that all it takes?" Gavin asked while Miles had his first sip of coffee and let out a low moan of appreciation.

"That and what you did to me last night. I'm easy," Miles told him with a smile and a seductive look in his eyes. "I think that might have been the best night's sleep I ever had."

"The snoring was wonderful," Gavin said as the toaster popped up two slices.

"Was it that bad?" Miles asked.

"Oh, no. It was like the singing of the angels," Gavin told him as he buttered the first slice of toast and handed it to him.

"Well, if I wasn't sound asleep, I would probably have something sarcastic to say about your snoring too," Miles shot back and bit into his toast with undue violence. "I have to go get ready to go to work now, or you would hear more from me about how wonderful and terrible you are." He finished off his toast and the hot coffee too quickly for Gavin's liking. A goodbye kiss at the front door and he was off.

As soon as he closed the door after him, Gavin texted Miles. "Next time I'll make you a proper breakfast."

"Don't make me come back over there, tackle you to the floor and make you late to pick up Benji," Miles threatened in his reply.

Gavin was almost ready to dare him to do it. It was so hard to let him go though he knew they would see each other soon, maybe that same day if Miles dropped by after work. As he was turning off the coffee maker, something new caught his eye. Taking the shopping list off the fridge, Gavin smiled at the word coffee written in giant letters that filled all the remaining space on the list. He didn't know when he did it, but Miles had made his mark.

As Gavin walked Benji from school, the little guy couldn't wait to get to the bookstore so he could show him what he did that day. Running

ahead of him into the store, Benji headed for the little kids' table. Meredith was in the back, packing up some orders and she yelled out hello to them. She was almost ready to load the boxes in her car and Gavin helped her with that while Benji took off his puffy jacket, cap and mittens.

"I made something in kindergarten," Benji told him after Gavin was done and Meredith had gone to the post office.

After unzipping his book bag, Benji came over to show him what he made. He held up two ornaments, one red one green, with the words Dad and Benjamin written on them in gold and green sparkly letters.

"Be careful not to drop them," Gavin said.

"They won't break. They are plastic," Benji said like plastic was a very special thing.

"I see. That's good and you did a great job. We'll hang these on our tree." They had bought a small tree, but hadn't decorated it yet. Gavin wanted to invite Miles to join them for the occasion.

"And another one," Benji said. He went back to rummage in his book bag and brought out one more ornament. This one had Miles' name written crookedly in silver sparkly letters on another red ornament. Benji held it up proudly then asked. "Is that right? It says Miles."

"Yes. It's very nice."

"Ms Johnson wrote it on a paper and then I did it on the ornament," Benji said proudly.

"Miles will like it a lot," Gavin said as he watched Benji set aside the ornaments with great care.

"Miles and I are friends, but it's OK if you're friends with us too, Dad," Benji told him.

"That's big of you, son."

"It is big of me," Benji agreed though he didn't know exactly what it meant only that he liked the sound of it.

"Miles and I are different kind of friends," Gavin said. Though Benji knew they dated, Gavin wasn't sure he understood what that meant. "We're boyfriends."

Benji only blinked at him behind his glasses. Gavin was hoping that would be the magic word that explained it all, and now he was at a loss for what to say next. "Do you know what that means?"

"It's kissing and stuff?" Benji said uncertainly.

"Right. That's right," Gavin said, relieved. "And I was thinking that we might ask Miles to come home with us and help us decorate the tree. What do you think of that?"

Benji beamed at Gavin and nodded. "Today? Today?" he said and started bouncing in place.

"Yes, today," Gavin told him and ruffled his hair, which Benji smoothed down immediately.

Miles came by after work and after texting a warning to Gavin. "I'm bringing my mom's cookies. Get ready to put down a riot." When he arrived, he came through the door lugging a heavy-looking shopping bag.

"Miles!" Benji squealed happily even before he knew what he had in the bag he was carrying.

Gavin motioned for Miles to stash his bag behind the counter so Benji could go first with what he brought from kindergarten. "Let's show him what you made," Gavin said to him.

Benji went and got all three ornaments. To show off his handiwork, he lined them up on the kids' table next to each other.

Seeing his name on one of them, Miles got teary eyed. "You made this for me?" he asked Benji.

"Yes. Don't worry. It won't break," Benji assured him. "And you can keep it."

"You are one great kid. Thank you so much," Miles told him.

"If you want, we can hang it on our tree with these two," Gavin offered. "It would be a shame to separate them."

Miles looked surprised and touched. "That would be really nice. Thank you," he said sounding a little choked up. He cleared his throat and spoke more cheerfully as he looked at all three ornaments together. "That way my ornament will be in good company." He gave both Benji and Gavin a hug.

That's when Benji pulled on Gavin's sleeve.

Gavin took the hint. "Benji and I wanted to know if you would like to come over today and help us decorate our tree?"

"You guys," Miles said, touched all over again. "I would love that. Thank you."

Benji was happy with his answer and wanted to go right now. To distract him, Miles had Benji tell him all about the painstaking work of making his ornament masterpieces. There were many twists and turns, and ups and downs to the saga, as well as glue and glitter.

"Benjamin, not Benji?" Miles said. "You could have saved yourself some work."

"At kindergarten, I'm Benjamin," Benji said gravely.

"That's a good name too," Miles told him.

"Do you have another name?" Benji wanted to know.

"No. Just Miles."

"Dad has another name."

Miles had a guess about what it might be. "Is it Gavin?"

"Yes."

"That reminds me of something," Miles said. "When I was little, another kid asked me what my dad's name was. I told her my dad's

name was Dad, but I couldn't convince her. She said, 'He has to have another name. What does your mommy call him?' I told her, 'Mom calls him honey.'"

"Honey?" Benji said like he wasn't a hundred percent sure that Honey wasn't actually his father's name.

"OK. Now there are two kids who believe my father's name is Honey Cantone. I'm going to leave it at that," Miles said smugly and mimed a mic drop. "Now do you want to see what I got?"

Benji nodded and Miles went to get the bag he had stashed behind the counter. "They're here! Christmas cookies have arrived!" he announced. He pulled out three big tins, set them on the kids' table and opened them up to show all the different cookies that were packed in there.

"So many!" Benji said, his eyes going wide at all the red and green sprinkles, the chocolate drizzle, coconut flakes, the powdered sugar, the butterscotch stripes. Just one look and Benji had gone into a sugar trance.

Miles smiled, but Gavin could tell that he was trying not to get sad. Going over to stand next to him, Gavin rubbed his back. He felt Miles' arm go around his waist as they watched Benji looking into one cookie tin then another.

The cookies were a constant temptation to Benji even after they went home and started decorating the tree. Since it wasn't very big, it didn’t take them long to make it festive. They stepped back and looked proudly at it all lit up and decorated. It twinkled against the backdrop of the city at night as seen through the window. The best part was the three ornaments with their names on them hanging there together.

"That's the best tree ever," Miles decided, saying what Gavin had been thinking.

Chapter 20

Miles had taken tons of pictures of the tree decorating. Benji would be grinning from ear to ear in one picture then looking serious as he considered the perfect placement for some special ornament. They didn't get more special than the three he decorated with their names. Looking at the three ornaments together still made Miles all choked up.

Benji was now in bed, and Miles was in the kitchen with Gavin. Dinner clean up was almost finished. Putting away the last of the dinner dishes, Gavin eyed the three cookie tins, which were stacked on the kitchen counter.

"Did you have to bring all three of them?" he asked Miles offhandedly. He was worried about how he was going to deny them to Benji. Thinking about it more seriously, Gavin stopped what he was doing and kissed Miles lightly, consolingly. "You brought them over here because they make you sad," Gavin guessed correctly.

"A little bit," Miles admitted. The cookie tins were filled to the brim with home-baked cookies his mom made. Many of them were golden oldies from his childhood, while some were new. His mom liked to keep things interesting while not abandoning the old favorites. Miles remembered how he used to be the main taste tester when his mom was trying out new cookies. He always needed to try just one more to make sure he liked them, but in the end he gave them a thumbs up without fail.

Thinking back to moments like that was jarring to him. Was that really the same Mom who was making excuses for the way his grandfather treated him? It couldn't be. That disconnect was why he was keeping the cookie tins here and not at his place.

"They make me think of all the Christmases with my family when things weren't so... strained," Miles explained while Gavin encircled him with his arms and kissed his face sweetly. "In some ways things are better than they used to be, but that's mostly because I don't live at home, and I stay away from my grandfather when I visit my parents. But I can't avoid him during the holidays."

Gavin sighed and looked at Miles sympathetically. "I'm tempted to tell you to force the issue and make them stand up to your grandfather. I want to, but I understand why you want to keep the ties you have even if they are frayed. I know what it's like not to have a family. In all honestly, I can't recommend it."

Miles hugged him tightly and then tried to banish sadness and regret from his own heart. "It's the best thing for everyone. I won't set off my grandfather, and he won't set me off either. No one needs that kind of

holiday scene. Yes, it was hard for Thanksgiving, picturing everyone together and not being there. I could practically taste Mom's homemade cranberry sauce. But I got through it, and I'll get through Christmas too," he said confidently.

"Not alone you won't. You're spending Christmas with me and Benji," Gavin told him and took his hand to lead him to the couch.

Miles smiled at him as they sat down. "That didn't sound very much like a question," he noted.

"It wasn't. But you could consider it an invitation. One that you are not allowed to refuse," Gavin stated firmly and leaned his forehead against Miles'.

"I don't remember you being this bossy when you were my boss," Miles said and tilted his face up for a kiss. "And what are your plans for Christmas?" he asked Gavin.

"Benji and I are invited for dinner at a friends' house and I want you to join us. It will be just Joanna and Dave, and the three of us, plus their dog, Rosie.

And just in case he was thinking of refusing, Gavin pulled out his phone and showed him a picture of Benji hugging a big black lab. "When you show me that picture, how can I refuse?" Miles asked.

"Exactly what I was hoping for," Gavin said. "But I was thinking beyond Christmas. You'll be out of school and out of work, so we can do something."

"Stay in bed all day, every day?" Miles proposed while wiggling his eyebrows.

"Not quite. Check this out," Gavin said and showed him another picture on his phone. Miles saw a snowy scene with a big house and fir trees. "It's a bed and breakfast. It's owned by some friends of mine."

"All I see is snow," Miles said.

"That's how it is up there right now. They have two vacancies at the B&B. We can go up there a few days for the snow and be back here for New Year's," Gavin told him and eyed him expectantly.

Miles put on a skeptical look. "I don't know. A bed and breakfast isn't really my speed." He said with a shrug and an exaggerated sigh. "You'll need to talk me into it. Bribe me. Coerce me."

"So that's a yes," Gavin concluded. "I'll text them to save us those two rooms."

"You are such a bully. And Benji will get to build a snowman," Miles said while Gavin texted to reserve the rooms. He noticed that he didn't waste any time. "You really don't want to lose those rooms, huh."

"The only reason they are up for grabs is because of a last minute cancellation. It's a lucky break. We would go on Christmas Eve. Our first stop is dinner at Joanna and Dave's. Because of the state of the roads, we should stay there overnight then go on to the B&B on

Christmas morning."

"But for New Year's we have to be here for the fireworks, right?" Miles asked.

"Right. Benji wouldn't forgive us if he missed them. But he's going to love the snow too," Gavin said. Done with texting he was showing Miles more pictures.

The place looked rustic, and Miles noticed that all the rooms had fireplaces. "Fireplaces are cool, but there is central heating, I hope."

"Of course there is," Gavin assured him.

"Then I'm all for fireplaces. We can roast marshmallows. Put a couple of bags on your shopping list," Miles said.

"I'll put one bag."

"Don't be stingy," Miles admonished him and Gavin kissed him to shut him up.

Chapter 21

Miles was a little nervous about the plans for Christmas and the following week. He would be meeting a whole bunch of Gavin's friends and he wasn't sure if he could make a half-decent impression. The day after he agreed to go, Gavin told him what happened when he talked to Benji about it.

"For Christmas we are going to see Joanna and Dave and Rosie. And after that we'll stray with Allan and Ron, and you get to play in the snow," Gavin had told him.

Benji was thrilled by this plan, but then he asked, "What about Miles?"

"I don't know. I guess we have to leave him behind," Gavin said.

"No, no," Benji said then according to Gavin, he shook his head hard enough to dislodge his glasses.

"What do you think we should do about him?" Gavin asked while Benji pushed his glasses back into place.

"Bring him," that sweet boy said.

"We can do that. OK," Gavin told him.

He kind of felt guilty for teasing Benji like that, and he chalked it up to Miles' bad influence. It still made Miles smile. Benji was such a good kid.

Miles bragged about that to Candice when he went over to her place to drop off her gift. She looked at him like he was crazy. "Your whole life is so weird and crazy right now," she told him.

"You mean because it's so normal. And speaking of things that are not normal. What is this?" he asked her as he peered at a very odd looking ornament.

"A zombie Santa ornament, obviously," Candice told him. "I find that it perfectly embodies the spirit of the season."

"Twisted. Where did you find this monstrosity? I need the exact location so I can keep this disturbing concept from Benji's innocent eyes," Miles told her.

"Oh, my God. You sound like a parent or something," Candice said with distaste.

"Me?"

"Yes. Protecting a child from ugly reality is classic parental wrongheadedness," she said.

"Did I just hear you say... reality? A zombie Santa ornament is what we were talking about, you know," Miles pointed out.

"You know what I mean. You're turning into a dad," Candice told him.

She said it with undisguised horror, but Miles grinned at her accusation. These days that was something he was working toward. He just hoped that Gavin might see him that way too.

On Christmas Eve, they were meeting at the Bookworm around midmorning. Gavin wanted to take care of a few last minute things for work before he let Meredith mind the store. According to him, even if they hit bad weather, they would be fine as long as they were on the road by noon. So far the weather was gloomy.

Holiday decorations did offer Miles a burst of cheer here and there as he walked to the bookstore on a gray, dreary midmorning. Murky clouds were moving across the sky, carrying with them the threat of rain that would make the day even more miserable. He was hoping they would drive right out of this mess once they got going.

"Wow, it's ugly out there," Miles said to Gavin as he went into the bookstore. "But it's sexy in here." He leaned across the counter and gave Gavin a kiss hello.

Ugly weather or not, Benji was packed and raring to go. He had his book bag on his shoulders and couldn't be convinced to take it off. To keep him occupied and out of Gavin's hair, Miles had him help put a few things in the car. But as soon as they were done, Benji was back to trying to rush Gavin to get going already.

"Meredith and her mom and daughter will be here soon to take over, then we can set off," Gavin said. He told Miles more about who would be minding the store. "Meredith's daughter is visiting from college. She wants to earn a little money so she'll help out too."

"They're here!" Benji exclaimed, seeing them out the store windows.

"Three generations are here to see us off, wow," Miles said when Meredith, her daughter and her mother came in, and he got introduced to them. There was white haired Lucille, Meredith with her red hair in a bob, and her daughter with her long, dark, mahogany red hair. They all waved to them as they got into the car.

The trunk was full of wrapped gifts they were going to open at Joanna and Dave's, and they were ready to head out as soon as Benji was secured.

Taking his seat, Miles turned around to face Benji as he got buckled into his car seat. "The first one to see snow wins. So keep your eyeballs peeled."

"Peeled?" Benji said, confused.

"Keep a sharp lookout for snow," Miles told him.

"I will!" Benji said.

"I think he was going to do that anyway," Gavin said as he got in the driver's seat.

"We're going to see Rosie! She's a good dog," Benji said. He had so

much to be excited about on this trip.

Gavin was in a good mood too. That's why Miles tried not to let his case of nerves show. He probably didn't have any reason to stress so much. After all meeting Bruce didn't kill him. He was just worried that if his friends didn't like him, Gavin would start to have misgivings again.

"Oh, no, I forgot to pack the cookies my mom sent me," Miles said once they got on the highway.

"Whaaa! Let's go back. Let's go back," Benji said in alarm. Good thing he wasn't at the wheel, or they would be skidding into a sharp turn and heading right back where they came from.

"I was kidding. I have them right here," Miles said and raised a shopping bag with two of the cookie tins stacked inside it.

Benji glared at him briefly for his little joke then asked, "Can we have some now?"

"We're going to share them with Joanna and Dave," Gavin told him. "We don't want to take them a half empty tin."

"OK," Benji agreed but his eyes still shone brightly at the thought of all those cookies.

As they drove well out of town, they were met with clear skies and sunshine glinting off puddles. That meant a rainstorm must have passed through. So far they hadn't encountered any show yet. To Benji's disappointment, it was like that all the way to Joanna and Dave's house. At least their house was all decked out for Christmas with plenty of lights on the outside though it wasn't fully dark yet. An impressive tree was visible through the front window.

They had only just parked in their driveway when a dog ran out the front door to greet them. Joanna and Dave waited on the porch and rushed them to come in so they could all get out of the cold. Their house smelled good and looked festive. It was furnished in a neat, minimalist style, which was buried under a ton of Christmas decorations at the moment. If the decorations were more traditional and less weirdly whimsical, Miles would have been even more painfully nostalgic. But the house was decked out in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* style rather than with his mom's more traditional Christmas tchotchkes.

Introductions were made, but Benji's attention was all on the dog. Rosie was excited by the visitors at first then went to lie next to the tree, almost like she was guarding the gifts under there. Joanna greeted Miles very warmly and acted like Gavin's big sister in general. That was fitting considering what Gavin told him.

"Joanna and Dave are Benji's honorary aunt and uncle," Gavin said as

he introduced them.

"That means you must have gotten him some seriously cool presents," Miles said with a grin.

"The coolest," Dave said right away but his wife looked at him funny.

"So this must be a gift only a guy could love," Gavin concluded based on her look.

"Benji will love it," she said with a shrug.

"I'm already petrified," Gavin said.

"You'll love it man, you'll love it," Dave assured him with a clap on the back, but Gavin didn't look like he believed that for a second.

"No snow, huh?" Miles said. The only snow was the fake stuff that surrounded some of the decorations.

"We had some flurries but, as you see, nothing to show for it," Dave said and seemed as disappointed as any kid.

"They'll have more than enough at the B&B," Joann said then showed them to the two small guest rooms. Once there she noticed Benji bring out Momo from his backpack. "I see you brought a friend."

"It's Momo. I lost him then me and Miles found him in a store," Benji said and hugged Momo tightly.

"Sounds like Miles has been good to you guys," she said.

"Yes," Benji agreed, then he exclaimed, "Cookies!"

Gavin laughed. "Miles and I will go get them and the rest of the stuff too. You wait here."

"Get the presents," Benji told them. "But no shaking."

"Yes, we'll get the presents and no shaking, I promise," Gavin told him.

Before he left, Miles had one piece of advice for Benji. "Don't let Rosie play with Momo. Dogs use their teeth to hold things, and that wouldn't be good for Momo."

Benji looked worried until Joanna said they could leave Momo in the guest room and close the door.

Once they were outside, Gavin kissed Miles. "Good thinking back there," Gavin told him. "I think you might have prevented a tragedy."

"It wasn't a huge leap from toy to chew toy," Miles said with a shrug.

"I like how you know what's important to Benji and you look out for him."

"Does that mean you'll carry the heavy stuff?" Miles asked as they unloaded some of their things from the car.

Though Miles had arrived there worried about what kind of impression, he would make, he had no trouble relaxing around Joanna and especially the easygoing Dave. Rosie was no problem, of course. Dinner was a rolled pork dish with herbs, prosciutto and dried fruit. Benji had exactly one bite and made up for it by eating plenty of rice

and snow peas. Not wanting excellent food to go to waste, Miles asked Benji if he could have his piece of rolled pork and finish it for him. Benji gave it up gladly.

As he took it from his plate, Miles noticed Joanna looking at him funny. "Sorry. I probably just broke some serious rule of etiquette, didn't I?" he said sheepishly and hoped he hadn't embarrassed Gavin or their hosts.

"Oh, no. Not at all," Joanna told him. "But finishing a kid's food is so parental. I see my friends do it all the time with their kids."

Miles wasn't sure what to say to that, but Dave jumped right in. "It's a compliment to your skills, hon. That's some good stuff you cooked up."

"This is really great food," Miles said, but what Dave said made him think of Gavin cooking for him. There was something really special about eating food made by the man he loved. No matter how good, nothing else would ever compare.

Chapter 22

After dinner, when it was time for Benji to go to bed, he didn't go easily. He went over to sit next to Rosie and leaned his head against her like he was fine sleeping right there, cuddled up next to her. "She's warm. I'll be OK with her," Benji claimed.

While Miles took pictures of the adorable scene, Gavin used Momo to lure Benji to bed. "Should we leave Momo all alone then?"

At the mention of his beloved bear, Benji jumped to his feet and hurried off to the guest room. While Gavin stayed with Benji to make sure he wouldn't wake up alone in an unfamiliar place, Dave went to walk the dog in the freezing cold and Miles helped Joanna with dinner dishes.

She was pulling warm dishes from the dishwasher while Miles dried pots and pans. He was working hard to make a good impression.

"Thanks for lending a hand. I need clean dishes and an empty dishwasher for tomorrow," she told him.

"It's just my way of saying thanks for inviting me," Miles told her.

"Any boyfriend of Gavin's is welcome," she said. "Gavin and I were friends since college. After his father, I guess stepfather, disowned him and then his mom died, I vowed to be his family. When I got serious about Dave, I made him take the same vow."

"That's great. I can't believe you two are cooking another dinner for tomorrow," he said seeing how she stacked the serving dishes to the side, ready for their Christmas Day dinner.

"Tonight was just a dress rehearsal. We have a bunch of nieces and nephews coming tomorrow. That will be something. I wish Benji was going to be here to play with them," Joanna said then sighed. "It’s nice to have kids around, but Dave and I are still dragging our feet about having kids of our own. It's scary. But Gavin really surprised me when he decided to adopt Benji and then again with you," she said and turned to beam at Miles. "I think Gavin did good."

"He has good taste," Miles said with a smirk, but he might have been blushing a little.

Going back to the living room, he found Gavin checking his phone and bragged to him. "Joanna approved of me."

"I'm not surprised. She did once advise me, 'Forget these boring, business types. Get yourself a cute boy toy.' And you are as cute as they come." Gavin gave him a sly grin then kissed him on the cheek.

"Boy toy," Miles grumbled. A boy toy wasn't someone you stuck with for life, and that was what he wanted. Damn. How did his thoughts turn serious all of a sudden? Judging from his questioning expression, Gavin was wondering the same thing.

Dave came back from walking Rosie, and Joanna joined them so Miles didn't get the chance to talk to Gavin until they retired to the guest room for the night. Miles and Gavin were sharing the same room, though they wouldn't be at the B&B. It might be smaller, but the B&B was still basically a hotel.

That's why Miles wanted to make the most of his time here, sharing a bed with Gavin. Being called a boy toy had unsettled him and brought back all his insecurities about being taken seriously by Gavin. As soon as the door to the guest room was closed and they found themselves alone, Gavin asked him what was on his mind.

At first Miles couldn't even answer. His heart burned with too much emotion that he couldn't express. Finally he managed to say what was on his mind. "This trip and everything we've been doing together means that we're serious, right?"

"Yes, it does. I already told you as much before," Gavin told him and took hold of his hands.

"Right. I just want to make sure that you know I'll stick by you," Miles told him earnestly and looked into his eyes. With only one lamp on in the room, the blue of his eyes was darkened but still beautiful.

"Same here. I wouldn't have told Benji we were boyfriends and I wouldn't be dragging you all over the countryside if I didn’t love you."

"Love me?" Miles was stunned and speechless. He had to remind himself to breathe. "Then I can say it too. I've been dying to tell you I love you. And also this." He gasped out the words then he grabbed Gavin and kissed him. "You made me so happy," he finally said turning earnest and maybe even a little teary eyed. "Wait. When did you tell Benji we were boyfriends?"

"Didn't I mention that?" Gavin asked innocently.

"Yes. That's why I'm so surprised to hear it," Miles said, but he couldn't hide how happy he was. He had been so worried that Gavin would never take him seriously. Now he didn't want to stop kissing him. He threw his arms around him and joined their lips in a tender kiss.

"You are kind of an unexpected gift," Gavin said as they paused to breathe, and his cold hands slipped under Miles' clothes.

"Cold, cold, cold," Miles complained.

"They'll warm up," Gavin told him and continued groping him mercilessly. As promised, his hands did warm up and his touch turned blazing hot. The feeling spread all through him, burning him up from the inside out.

Just as he had him panting, Gavin pulled away. "I don't know if I can do it in front of an audience." He pointed all around at the pictures of an old lady. "That's Joanna's beloved great-grandmother."

Miles hadn't taken stock of the room before, just stashed his duffel

bag in there. Now that he was taking a good look around, Miles saw what gave Gavin pause. It wasn't just one framed photo. Pictures of the little white-haired great-grandma were everywhere. "Why are there so many?" Miles wondered. "It seems like overkill."

"To discourage what we were about to do, maybe?" Gavin said.

"That is diabolical. And sort of effective. Let's turn the pictures face down," Miles said.

"Or we can just go to sleep. We leave early tomorrow," Gavin suggested, giving up way too easily.

"Is this what it's like to be a responsible adult?" Miles asked.

"Yes."

"This shows you how much a love you. I'm sleeping in a room full of grandma pictures and not getting any. There is no greater proof of love," Miles told him. "OK. Let's just go to sleep."

"I agree. Now let me help you get ready for bed," Gavin said and began undressing him.

"Is that what you are doing?" Miles asked as his sweater went over his head.

"Exactly. But my hands might go astray." Gavin demonstrated by brushing his hand over his crotch and then squeezing his ass. When Miles glanced sideways at the grandma pictures, Gavin told him, "Close your eyes. Don't open them no matter what. I'll take care of everything."

And he did. Afterward they were both satisfied and asleep in each other's arms.

Chapter 23

Gavin set his alarm to wake them so early, they were up before Benji on Christmas morning. That must have been a first in human history. When Gavin went in to wake him, Benji sat up hugging Momo with one arm while rubbing his eyes with the other. "Is it snowing?" he asked.

Miles wondered if he had dreamed about it.

"Not yet. But it will be where we're going," Gavin told him. "Let's go get ready."

As soon as he remembered what day it was, Benji grabbed his glasses from the nightstand and scrambled out of bed. Snow or not, it was Christmas morning and there were presents waiting under the tree.

Joanna and Dave were strict about opening presents on Christmas morning so that's what they did after they had breakfast and before they left for the B&B. They were all sitting in a semicircle in front of the tree, surrounded by balled up wrapping paper. Benji insisted on grabbing all discarded papers and balling them up. It was his little neat freak thing kicking in. There were still a few gifts left to unwrap, but Dave already unpacked the remote controlled car he got Benji.

"Yes, Dave does know you live in a fairly small apartment," Joanna said.

"He can play with it at the store," Dave said.

"The customers will love it," Gavin said.

Dave didn't pay any attention to his sarcastic tone. He was busy showing Benji how to work the controls though it might have seemed as if he was just playing with the toy before he had to give it up. Rosie followed the car with her eyes while resting her head on her paws and generally not understanding what all the fuss was about. She already got her gifts, including an actual big bone.

Next up was Miles' gift to Gavin. "This is from both me and Benji," he said as he handed it to him shyly.

Hearing his name Benji came over to see his dad opening the gift.

"This is wonderful," Gavin said and smiled at what he saw – page after page of pictures of him and Benji. "What more could a dad want?"

Still, Miles felt the gift fell short in one department. "Maybe not the most romantic gift..." he started to say but Gavin stopped him with a kiss.

"No. It is romantic. It really is. This gift says that you get me. It's perfect," Gavin told him.

"OK, good. And, as you can see, I picked only the goofiest pics of

you," Miles pointed out.

"As long as Benji is in them, I don't mind."

"I'm in all of them," Benji said, sounding surprised.

"You're an important guy," Miles told him. Then he flipped to the back where he had a picture of Gavin, Benji and Momo.

"Momo!" Benji said happy to see him.

"He's an important guy too," Miles told him.

"OK. Your turn," Gavin said and handed him a large box.

As with some other big things, Miles was both scared and excited. He unwrapped it and saw that it was a coffee maker. Not too big but slick. "Dude. You are a god," Miles said and gave Gavin a kiss. "Talk about knowing what matters to a guy."

"Glad you like it," Gavin said.

Dave nodded in approval, but neither Benji nor Jonna were impressed.

"That is such an old, married couple gift," Joanna said.

Miles turned to her with a grin. "Then it suits my ambitions perfectly." After last night, he was a lot more hopeful that this whole old, married couple thing was in their future.

Chapter 24

When it was time to go, Benji took his time saying goodbye to Rosie. Then they loaded the gifts in the car and started off for the B&B and snow. They didn't see any for a while though.

"Are we there yet?" Benji asked impatiently.

"You'll know we're almost there when we see snow," Gavin told him.

Craning his neck, Benji looked all around and pronounced, "No snow."

"Well, there's your answer," Gavin told him.

The first signs of snow were patchy and unimpressive, but Benji still asked, "Are we there now?"

Then the views of snow turned endless. The landscape was flat with only silos sticking up into the sky. The snowy fields mesmerized Benji. He was dying to go running and rolling around in all that snow.

"The snow is everywhere," Benji exclaimed and didn't take his eyes off it the whole way.

Closer to the B&B, the two-lane road started winding through the snowy woods. It was a postcard perfect view of the green of the fir trees and pure white snow. Benji stared all around and squealed. "So much snow."

"We are going to make so many snow angels," Miles told him.

"Snowmens!" Benji said.

"Snowmens too," Miles said then he turned to Gavin and spoke with his voice lowered. "He's saying snowmens instead of snowmen."

"I tried telling him it's snowmen, but it didn't stick," Gavin said and then the B&B came into view.

It was a big, impressive house with a huge porch, but Benji only cared about the snow that surrounded it. A few cars were parked to one side of it so they weren't too conspicuous. They pulled in there next to the other cars and Benji had to be unbuckled immediately or he would burst.

As soon as he was free of his car seat, Benji darted out into the snow to the shouts of "be careful" from both Gavin and Miles. The untrampled snow on the side of the house was irresistible to him, and he had to run around in it and watch his own footprints appear behind him.

While Gavin got some of their stuff from the back of the car, Miles went after Benji. Before he could catch up to him, Benji had made a snowball and sent it flying his way.

"You're fast. But you don't have your mittens on," Miles told him and took him by the hand before the tiny, overeager boy escaped into the snowy wilds. They hadn't bothered with mittens since they were going

straight inside to check in, but Benji shouldn't be playing out there without them.

The B&B had the look of a fancy, old farmhouse. Maybe it was. Miles could tell it would be interesting to stay there, and maybe a little intimidating too. When Benji stopped suddenly, Miles looked up and saw two guys come out onto the porch.

"Don't you remember Allan and Ron?" Gavin asked Benji who was holding on to Miles' hand.

Benji nodded but he didn't look a hundred percent sure. Gavin then introduced Miles to Allan and Ron and they welcomed them to the B&B that was named after them. They all went inside under the sign that read Allan & Ron's B&B.

"And you just used your own names. Not Country Meadow Lark Wren Forest Glen?" Miles asked them.

Ron laughed and startled Benji with his booming voice.

"We kicked around a few different names then decided to keep it simple," Allen said.

As soon as they walked in, Miles noticed that the interior of the bed and breakfast smelled like pine needles and smoke. The pine smell came from the fresh pine boughs that were decorating all the doorways in the foyer. Most of the doors downstairs stood open and Miles saw that the smoky smell was coming from the stone fireplace in the big living room. There was also a dining room that flowed right into a big kitchen.

As further welcome, Ron served them warm apple cider. He was a sturdy, middle-aged guy with thick eyebrows and a graying beard.

"Yup, we definitely have a future Santa Claus in the making," Allan said noticing how both Miles and Benji looked at him.

At his words, Benji's eyes went wide, as if he might truly be standing in the presence of the real Santa Claus.

"When I get old, I will definitely play Santa," Ron told him and Benji approved of that plan.

From the kitchen, they followed the skinny and tall Allan to the foyer to check in. There wasn't a proper reception desk only a roll top desk in the corner. Allan sat behind it and checked them in. He handed them their keys and had them sign the guest book.

"Me too," Benji said once Gavin and Miles were done putting down their names.

"Do you know how to stay inside the lines?" Miles asked him.

"Of course I do. I'm in kindergarten. I know lots of stuff," Benji said.

"Then maybe you can check my homework," Miles said and showed him his name.

Benji squinted at it then smiled. "It's like the Miles ornament. It's

good."

Allan took them up to show them to their rooms. They had the only two rooms on the third floor, which used to be an attic. The stairs leading up to the top floor were narrow and a little steep.

The bigger room went to Gavin and Benji, but both bedrooms had a their own small fireplace. Going to his own room at the end of the hall, Miles took in the cozy room as he hoisted his duffel bag onto the full sized bed. The ceiling was slanted to follow the line of the roof, the roof beams exposed. The bed was bigger than he expected, probably for the benefit of couples who stayed there.

The room might be small but it was plenty for Miles. Wood beams had been painted white but the grain still showed through. The window was narrow and tall looking out onto the woods, the treetops green and white. Not a bad view. A fresh pine wreath decorated the door and scented the room.

The decor had a whimsical, country look to it. The quilt on the bed had a stylized bird and fox motif. A cat and a ball of yarn were carved into the headboard and a wooden horse served as the base of the lamp on the nightstand. On the wall was a painting of a mouse sneaking up on a plate with half an apple and a wedge of cheese on it.

Miles wasn't sure who all of this was supposed to appeal to. Then he realized that Benji might like the décor even if he didn't. Miles went over to Gavin's room. Poking his head into their more subdued room with two beds in it, he invited father and son to come see his room.

"I like your horse," Benji said right away.

"I knew you would. This horse is a lamp. And see that mouse." Miles pointed at the painting.

"He's going to eat the cheese," Benji exclaimed then stared like he was waiting for the mouse to do just that. "Your room is good."

"We only have some ducklings and a deer," Gavin said.

"They are good too," Benji said, but clearly they only took second place to the menagerie in Miles' bedroom.

"These are all antiques actually. Some of this would be considered folk art," Gavin said and pointed around the room. From what he said, Miles understood that this stuff was probably expensive.

"I don't know if that's a good enough excuse," Miles told him.

"Benji is going to run us ragged. You'll be too tired to do anything but sleep in here," Gavin predicted, but Miles hoped he was wrong.

"I plan to save my energy," Miles told him and gave him a significant look.

Gavin cleared his throat in warning though what Miles said was pretty darn vague. He was keeping it clean. It was Gavin who had his mind in the gutter.

Other than a quick look around and a trip to the bathroom in the hall, they didn't stay inside for long. Dressed for the weather, they headed out. Instead of his usual leather jacket, Miles had on a puffy jacket. Benji approved of it since he was wearing something similar.

Now properly equipped with hat and mittens, Benji ran outside and scooped up handfuls of snow to throw at Gavin and Miles. It might have been two against one, but they didn't stand a chance, though sometimes they did have to step forward so the snowballs would actually hit them. When they moved on, Miles walked a little ahead as their scout so Benji wouldn't step into a hole that got filled with snow or get tripped up by anything.

They went further from the B&B, passing through a clearing. The sun hung bright and high in the clear, blue sky sending down rays that bounced off the snow, dazzling Miles. He squinted at Benji, who was scampering around for the sheer joy of being out in the snow.

"It's picture perfect," Miles said, his eyes taking in the scenery and Benji so happy in the midst of it.

"That's because you're here," Gavin told him. He put an arm around Miles, kissed him on the cheek, and they both watched Benji taking full advantage of being out in the snow.

Chapter 25

As Gavin stood in a snowy field with his arm around Miles while Benji played, he thought how amazing it was that they were all together. Not long ago Miles was only an employee and Benji was in foster care. It scared Gavin when he thought that he might never have taken the steps to adopt him. And Miles was back in his life by pure chance. What if they hadn't gone to Vic's Diner that day?

"You OK?" Miles asked him probably because Gavin was squeezing him too hard.

"Just thinking about fate."

Miles frowned and shook his head slowly. "Too deep, man. Too damn deep. We're just playing in the snow."

Gavin chuckled, and of course Miles was right. He could be grateful for what he had without getting all maudlin about it. The next thing on their agenda was making some snow angels. They covered the field with them and Benji was thrilled. That's what it was all about.

Moving on from there, Benji wanted to explore a nice wooded area. It was cooler in the shade of the trees though sunbeams came down in bright patches that sparkled off the snow. Here they could hear the twittering of a bird and the creaking of branches as they swayed with a light breeze. Pine boughs held onto heavy loads of snow and sometimes let go suddenly, startling Benji.

Seeing him jump, Miles told him. "That's the snow gremlins at work."

"Snow gremlins?" Benji said in wonder.

"They jump up and down to shake the branches and make the snow fall off," Miles said as he pointed to all the branches sagging, heavy with snow.

Suddenly a pile of snow dropped off a branch, and Benji looked that way eagerly. When he didn't see any gremlins, he looked at Miles suspiciously.

"Snowball fight!" Miles announced to throw off suspicion.

They engaged in a snowball fight while using the trees for cover. When Gavin caught sight of Benji stockpiling snowballs, he beamed with pride at his smart strategy.

"Don't make them too tight or you'll take someone's arm off," Miles said.

After a while, Gavin checked to make sure Benji wasn't too cold. He was OK for now.

"I'll get us some warm drinks from the B&B so we can stay out here for a while longer," Miles said.

"Good idea. They'll have a thermos in the kitchen," Gavin told Miles as he jogged back following the trail they had made in the snow.

Gavin turned to Benji. "And what should we do while we wait for Miles?"

"Hide and seek," Benji yelled. "I'm gonna hide. You count to ten hundred."

"OK. But don't go too far," Gavin told him.

Benji had some warnings of his own. "Don't count fast, and no peeking." With that he ran off.

"Not too far," Gavin warned him again then started counting slowly. At first he heard little footsteps then nothing but his own voice doing the slow count, as instructed. "Ready or not, here I come!" he announced.

Gavin turned all around and didn't see Benji anywhere. He went in search of him thinking that Benji would be easy to find. It turned out that Benji was better at hiding than he expected. In their snowball fight, they had trampled the snow around there. All the jumbled footprints didn't give him any kind of clue about which way Benji had gone.

When he couldn't find him, Gavin got uneasy. He started calling his name. Even if Benji didn't answer, Gavin was hoping he might make a sound and give himself away, but he heard nothing. The only sounds were the wind, his own footsteps, and his voice calling Benji's name.

Estimating how far he could have gone in that time, Gavin kept going all around the same area without finding Benji anywhere. He went further out, wherever he saw footprints, but he had no luck. It was taking too long and now he was calling for Benji more urgently, asking him to come out. Could he have fallen somewhere, been hurt? Where did he go? Was he lying unconscious in the snow?

Gavin pushed down the feeling of panic. He only lost sight of Benji a few minutes ago. He couldn't have gone that far. He was just hiding. The little guy was right there somewhere, behind one of these trees or snow covered bushes.

That's when he saw Miles coming back with a thermos and two cups. "I lost Benji. Help me find him," he said to Miles urgently.

Miles frowned with worry that reflected Gavin's own, and they split up to look and call for Benji. Finally Gavin heard Miles shout his name. He had spotted Benji and pointed to his hiding place. It was closer to Gavin so he reached his little boy first. Benji was crouching at the base of a tree with bushes hiding him from sight. Gavin's search pattern must have been crap if he didn't see him there. He should have kept a cool head.

As Gavin dropped to his knees in front of Benji, his little guy pouted with his head down. He didn't look happy to be found, but then he threw himself into Gavin's arms.

"Did you get hurt?" Gavin asked.

Benji shook his head mutely. Then he told him what was the matter. "You lost me. I was scared," he said tearfully.

"You were hiding and I was calling for you," Gavin told him and straightened his knit cap a little.

"But I didn't know where you were. You were supposed to find me," Benji complained, not letting him off the hook.

"I did find you. I promise I'll always find you," Gavin said and squeezed him in a tight hug.

"Don't take so long next time," Benji scolded him then looked up at Miles as he came to join them.

"You're small. I hardly saw you there," Miles said. "I guess you got found. Were you scared?" Miles asked Benji on seeing his unhappy expression.

"No," Benji said as he blinked away the last trace of tears from his eyes and pushed away from Gavin a little.

"You just said..." Gavin tried to say but Benji shook his head.

"No," Benji repeated stubbornly. Then he leaned closer to Gavin and whispered in his ear, "Don't embarrass me in front of Miles."

"I won't. Sorry," Gavin stage whispered back and smiled up at Miles. It was funny how much better he felt as soon as he saw Miles coming back. Once he was there, Gavin lost that panicky feeling and became rational again. With Miles helping him, he was sure that they would find Benji and that everything was going to be fine. Being alone and responsible for a whole tiny human being could overwhelm him sometimes.

And Benji was scared too, more than he should have been. Gavin wondered if he was responsible for that. Maybe Benji could hear the fear in Gavin's voice when he called for him.

"Why were you so upset when I couldn't find you?" Gavin asked while Miles opened up the thermos with hot cocoa.

"It's bed if no one can find you. The other kids didn't find me. I was all alone. And when I got scared and cried, they laughed at me," Benji told him.

"Was this in kindergarten?" Gavin asked.

"No. It was before when I was living in the house," Benji said and Gavin knew he meant when he was in foster care.

Gavin wondered if these other kids were tricking Benji by telling him to hide and then not coming to look for him at all. He glanced over at Miles, who returned a knowing frown, confirming that he thought so too.

"I'll always come look for you, and I'll find you no matter what," Gavin promised his little boy.

Miles handed Benji a cup with cocoa. "You can count on me too," Miles said. "I'll look for you and find you, but remember to answer

when we call so we don't worry."

"That's right," Gavin agreed. He had almost forgotten to tell him that. It really was a good thing Miles was there. He could be really sensible when it mattered. Gavin got kind of choked up when he thought of how he had come to depend on him.

Another clearing could be seen through the trees, and they headed for it. Perfect white snow was all around. They decided this was just the spot for making snowmen. First they made one little snow angel and two big ones, but didn't litter the field with them like before. Then they got to work on a snowman. It was officially Benji's snowman, but Miles and Gavin helped. When it was built, they used pennies for the eyes and a small pinecone for the nose. When the snowman was done, they stepped back to admire him.

"That is one good-looking snow-guy," Miles said.

"Snowman," Benji corrected him.

"Snow-dude?"

"Man. Snow man," Benji enunciated.

Miles gave it another try. "Snow-bro!"

"Maaaan," Benji intoned making him laugh.

"OK. Now you help me make a snowman," Gavin said. In the end, his snowman had pennies for eyes too but his nose was a twig.

"He's funny," Benji said.

Now that they had two snowmen, Miles asked, "Should we make them fight?"

"No. Our snowmens are friends," Benji told him.

"Snowmens?" Miles said and turned to Gavin. "Wasn't he correcting me earlier?"

Instead of a snowman fight, they made a third snowman. Now there was one for each of them. This one had a twig for a nose too. Seeing all three snowmen, Miles decided there was something missing. He picked apart an old pinecone and used the pieces to give each of the snowmen a smile.

"That was hard work. We better get back and rest up," Gavin said.

Benji was nowhere near ready to stop playing in the snow, but he never would be as long as it was light out. He didn't complain too much though because they still had to make it back to the B&B. On the way they followed the same path and revisited the familiar sights that reminded Benji of how much fun he had. And even the scare of not being found didn't bother him any more.

Reaching the B&B, they stepped up on the porch. Miles rubbed his hands together and stomped his feet to get the snow off his boots. Seeing what he was doing, Benji started stomping his feet too but more like a sumo wrestler.

That's when a light snow started to fall. As snowflakes flitted away on a breeze, Benji followed them with his eyes. He reached out his mittened hands and ran around, chasing snowflakes, trying to catch them as they fell around him. Gavin remembered to take pictures, as Miles joined in.

"You're supposed to catch them with your tongue," Miles said to Benji and stuck out his tongue to show him how.

As evening came on, they got ready to go inside. But first they took in the view of the sunset. From the porch they watched the sun sink into the snowy hills. The sight was only of slight interest to Benji, but Gavin and Miles stood in a tight embrace, like they would never let each other go.

Murmuring his name in his ear, warming his chilled earlobes with his breath, Miles told him, "You have the best ideas, and I love you for it."

"I love you too," Gavin said and he kissed him. He just wished he could feel Miles as he held him close, but it was hopeless through all their clothes.

Once the sun disappeared, they went in for the night and had a very good dinner of lamb chops and wild mushroom risotto. For dessert, Ron served up some cinnamon apple fritters dusted with powdered sugar and even more cinnamon. Gavin wanted no part of them, but Benji and Miles were big fans.

"Since Gavin didn't have any, I have seconds," Ron offered.

Miles seemed about to say yes to that, but then reconsidered. "We had enough. We're good," he said speaking of himself and Benji.

Benji went along with that though reluctantly. Gavin beamed at Miles for being so good for Benji's sake when he clearly wanted more. Remembering the way he used to think of Miles, Gavin was amazed at how much he trusted him now, and not just when it came to dessert.

It was only after he was done with dessert that Miles remembered where they were. "This is a bed and breakfast. What did I just eat?"

"We serve breakfast really late," Allan joked.

Ron chuckled. "It's my fault. After cooking breakfasts day after day, I was dying to branch out."

"Cooking dinner for an audience of one wasn't good enough for him," Allen said.

"I wanted to show off. So sue me," Ron admitted. "Lunch and dinner are optional and not offered every day. You guys signed up for it but the others went out." That explained why they hadn't gotten to meet any of the other guests.

"Tomorrow we'll be going out for dinner. There is a restaurant inside a greenhouse I thought we could visit," Gavin told Miles.

"Good choice," Allan told him. "The place is still all decked out with lights. The food is healthy, but you'll love it." With that last part he turned to Benji and Miles.

After dinner, Gavin, Miles and Benji sat in front of the fireplace. Ron and Allen were busy and that left the three of them alone in the living room. Benji was fascinated by the fire and constantly peered through the grate as the flames danced.

"Not too close to the fire," Gavin warned Benji and showed him on the floor how close he could get by pointing at the stones in front of the fireplace.

"We have marshmallows. We have to get sticks for them," he said excitedly. He was ready to go get them right now.

They had brought the marshmallows to roast, but Gavin couldn't allow him to eat any more sugar tonight. "We'll have them tomorrow night," he promised Benji and watched the firelight glowing in his eyeglasses and his eyes as he pouted.

"They'll taste even better tomorrow," Miles told him. "You'll see. We'll look for some good twigs so we can stick a whole bunch of marshmallows on each one."

Benji liked that plan and settled down, leaning against Gavin's side as he sat between him and Miles. Stealing a glance at Miles, Gavin saw his brown eyes turning golden as they reflected the flames. He was beautiful. Too bad they wouldn't have much time together once Benji went to bed. Gavin wanted to stay in the unfamiliar room with his little boy, especially since the old house made strange noises.

When it was time to go up to their rooms and to bed, Allan went up with them and offered to light their fireplaces. Only Miles took him up on it. Benji followed Allan into Miles' room so he could watch the magic. Gavin would probably spend the whole night awake if there was a fire in the same room where Benji slept.

Near the top of the stairs, Miles hung out with Gavin. "You are such a cute, overprotective dad," Miles told him. Then he leaned in close, their faces almost touching, and kept his voice low so only Gavin could hear. "That fire won't be enough to keep me warm. Send me off with a quick kiss."

"Like you're going to let me go after just one kiss," Gavin said, keeping his voice low as well. Avoiding his heated gaze, Gavin closed his hand over Miles' and felt him slump against his shoulder.

"True," Miles admitted. Then just as he had given up, Gavin took his face in his hands and gave him a soft, lingering kiss.

Miles stayed close to whisper in his ear some more. "You're so sneaky."

Gavin turned his head so his mouth was at Miles' ear. "I'll show you

how sneaky I can be later tonight."

"Look at them getting all mushy," Allan complained when he came out of Miles' room.

"Dad and Miles like each other like boyfriends," Benji explained as he followed him out of there.

"Is that what's going on?" Allan said with a grin.

"Yes," Benji confirmed wisely. He then went over to take Miles' hand and looked up at him proudly.

"You guys warm my heart," Allan told them. "I'm glad you decided to come and stay here with us."

"We're having a great time," Miles said and looked down at Benji who nodded in agreement.

Later on Miles came into their bedroom to say goodnight to Benji. He sat on the edge of his bed and Gavin handed him one of the snowmen books. While Benji hugged Momo and waited expectantly for his story, Miles pulled the covers snugly around both boy and bear. Then he opened the book and started by reading the acknowledgements. Since Gavin always skipped over them, they were new to Benji. Now Gavin would have to answer for skipping. Miles' voice was deep but low as he read, capturing the fun of the story but not getting Benji too hyper to fall asleep.

After Benji nodded off, Miles stayed for a little while to keep Gavin company and they both read books of their own. It should have been a tranquil time, but Gavin had trouble concentrating with Miles so close and off limits. He needed him too much. When Miles left to take a shower, Gavin knew he would have to join him in his room soon or go insane wanting him.

Chapter 26

Every time he blinked, Miles saw white. All that snow he looked at the entire day was burned into his mind's eye. Now he was in the bathroom, waiting for the shower to get good and hot before he went near it. In the meantime he admired the vintage looking fixtures absently and fantasized about Gavin.

When he got to his room, he was a little overheated from the shower and his room was glowing with the light of the fire. Miles was dressed only in his robe and he kept it on as he waited for Gavin. Finally Miles heard him knock and rushed to the door.

"You need something?" he asked to tease Gavin.

"You," he said and grabbed the back of Miles' head to draw him in for a kiss. "Your hair is damp," he noticed. Gavin grabbed the towel Miles had over his shoulder. He rubbed it over his hair as Miles grinned at him and pulled in close.

"I thought I would never get warm and now you got me overheated," Miles told him.

"You just took a hot shower and you have a fire going too," Gavin pointed out.

"I don't think that's it. This is all you," Miles said. The nearness of his body was too much for him especially with Gavin tugging playfully at the belt of his robe.

"I wasn't expecting to find you this close to naked," Gavin said as he untied the robe slowly.

"I can put on some clothes and you can rip them off me," Miles said playfully while Gavin slipped his hands inside his open robe for a teasing caress over his sides.

"No time for that. I've been wanting you all day long," Gavin confessed. Rasping and laced with desire, his voice made Miles shudder and surge toward him. Gavin grabbed him firmly by the arms and kissed him fiercely.

When he let him go, Gavin moved his hands to his shoulders and pushed the robe down his arms. As the robe fell to the floor, Miles reached for the buttons on Gavin's shirt. He undid each one followed by a kiss. When the shirt was lying on the floor next to his robe, Miles moved on to his fly. He moaned as he freed Gavin's cock then realized they were only getting started and he couldn't get too loud.

"Isn't Benji on the other side of that wall," Miles asked nodding toward the wall opposite the bed, where the fireplace was.

"No. There is a linen closet there, remember?" Gavin said.

"So he probably won't hear us."

"Not if we're quiet."

"I don't know if I know how to be quiet."

"Learn," Gavin growled at him then pushed Miles down on the bed and lay on top of him.

Miles panted as Gavin's naked body pressed him into the mattress. Grinding up into him, Miles wrapped his arms around him and kissed him. Their cocks rubbed together and Miles' breath hissed between his teeth. He wanted that cock inside him so damn much.

Gavin held onto his shoulders and kissed one nipple then the other. He kissed and licked Miles' abs but avoided his cock. The heat of desire was growing unbearable as Gavin's kisses ranged over his hot skin. Every inch of Miles was tingling.

Then his desire surged even higher with Gavin's lubed fingers pumping inside him. As Gavin worked him open, it took all of his self-control not to let out anything louder than an occasional low grunt. When his fingers withdrew, Miles gasped, dying to have Gavin inside him. He whispered his name, and Gavin told him, "Shh" and then he kissed him.

Kneeling between Miles' outstretched legs, Gavin bent him double, pressing against the backs of his knees. He pushed inside him slowly. With firm pressure, Gavin filled him up. Miles didn't know how he was keeping quiet. It was probably the fear that Gavin would stop that kept him from screaming out.

When Gavin was all the way in, Miles called his name in a desperate, shaky whisper and grabbed his ass. He felt it flexing as Gavin pumped in and out. Miles gritted his teeth and gripped the edges of his mattress as the pounding intensified. Flushed with extreme arousal, dying for the next thrust that would take him over the edge, Miles was losing control.

Then he was there. Muscles straining, arching off the bed, he was coming. He wished he could let it out, let everyone know how good Gavin made him feel, but he had to stay quiet and only whispered his thanks and praise in Gavin's ear.

Miles went to sleep wrapped in pure contentment and Gavin's strong arms. The next morning, Miles' eyes opened to bright sunshine in a cold room. Shutting his eyes against the glare of a bright, snowy morning, he rolled onto his back then groaned feeling the effects of last night.

His eyes drifted open, and he raised his head only enough to confirm that his fire had died down and that he was alone. Miles turned over again and buried his face in his pillow. Smelling Gavin there faintly, he remembered what they did last night and smiled to himself. Maybe memories from last night and his hand on his cock could keep him warm.

Finally getting up, Miles looked outside but didn't see any sign of snow falling during the night. Out of his window, the sun was just starting to rise, turning the treetops fiery red. Miles yawned at the view. It wasn't very warm in his room when the fire wasn't lit, so he hurried to get dressed.

Looking in the mirror hanging above a small dresser, he saw a ghastly sight. He was squinty eyed. His hair was sticking up all crazy. Oh, man, that was not a pretty sight, but it was all Gavin's fault. Now Miles was smiling at himself in the mirror thinking of Gavin. If Miles got his way, that man would see him looking like that every morning.

Going out into the hallway, Miles saw Benji sitting on the floor with a book on his knees. "Good morning, Benji," Miles told him and made him look up from his book.

"Miles! Good morning," Benji greeted him.

"So there is a line for the bathroom?" Miles asked since Benji was sitting across from the bathroom door.

"I'm all done. I'm waiting for Dad."

"I'll wait too then," Miles said and sat down on the floor next to him. They were near a heating vent so it was nice and warm there.

Once they were all done getting ready, the three of them went down to their first breakfast at the B&B. The other guests were there already, seated around the big table off the kitchen. Ron did quick introductions while loading everyone's plates with hash browns.

He started with Brianna and Jin, a girl with curly, blond hair peeking out from under a knit cap and a guy with his dark hair falling over his face. They were newlyweds and had moved their chairs to sit close together. There was also Vivian, an older woman who had a newspaper in front of her and only raised her head for a quick greeting before getting back to her crossword puzzle. Another couple was there too, Lars and Todd, a gray haired guy and a bald guy, both of them middle aged but in great shape. They only nodded at them in greeting then went back to arguing over something on their phones.

"No kids," Benji noticed, feeling small as he took a seat at the big table with all these adults.

"You have me and your dad to play with," Miles pointed out.

Benji sighed like he was willing to settle for a pair of second stringers like them. Once all three of them were sitting down, Benji looked at the food curiously and apprehensively. Every time he tried something he had to think hard to figure out if he liked it.

Miles didn't need to mull it over. Everything was good. The hash browns were perfectly browned, the over easy eggs perfectly runny, the sausage perfectly spicy.

Miles asked Ron and Allan, "How did you guys get into the bed and breakfast game?"

"I never imagined I would ever own a B&B," Allan said. "If you had told me that was in my future, I would have called you crazy."

"So it wasn't your dream to own a bed and breakfast?" Jin asked, showing some interest in something other than Brianna.

"It wasn't for either one of us," Ron said.

"We fell in love with this place, but it wasn't in the best shape. The only way we could afford to buy it and renovate it was if we made it pay for itself. Ron really took to it though," Allan said and beamed at his husband.

"I never thought I would enjoy playing host until people started paying me for it," Ron said.

"You guys are great," Brianna told them. "This is exactly what Jin and I were hoping for when we picked a B&B instead of a regular hotel."

"You certainly knocked this breakfast right out of the park," Miles said to Ron then he turned to Benji. "Benji, it's your job to make sure we work off this breakfast."

"Work?" Benji asked.

"You have to make sure that we play hard," Gavin explained.

"I will," Benji assured them with a solemn nod of his head, and they didn't doubt that he would.

Chapter 27

It was a cold clear morning. As Miles stepped outside, the glare off the snow blinded him for a second. Shading his eyes, he looked up. The warmth of the sun felt far away even as its brightness burned his eyes.

Next to him, Benji jumped in place. "It's brrrrrrr cold," he said but he looked perfectly happy about it as he grinned at all the snow.

"That it is, but Ron said they would be making hot cocoa again for later. That will warm us up when we're ready to go in," Gavin told him.

Allan had mentioned that they had a sled and brought it out of the shed for them. Miles told Benji to climb in and he pulled him as he squealed happily. They looked for a good place with enough of an incline so they could sled down, but they didn't have much luck.

They stopped from time to time for snowball fights and once to watch a squirrel digging in the snow. They hung back not to scare it, and Benji kept his mittened hands over his mouth so he wouldn't make a sound.

Pulling a little boy in a sled over rough terrain was harder than Miles thought. After a while, he got a little winded and stopped. He flopped down into the snow bank, but Gavin gave him a hand up, not letting him rest.

"Huskies have it rough," Miles said then went back to the sled. "That was hard work. Now you pull me," Miles said and handed the rope to Benji.

Taking the rope, Benji looked doubtful but also like he was going to give it his best shot.

"What a guy," Miles praised him. He picked up Benji and spun him around a few times.

Gavin was taking pictures of them then he pointed to where they should go next. There was a small hill and Miles wondered if it was smooth enough so they could use it to sled down. As they climbed up, he didn't see any place that was free of obstructions, so maybe not.

They still hiked to the top, with Miles pulling the empty sled. Benji went a little ahead and then suddenly tripped on something and went face first into the snow. Gavin rushed over to him and picked him up. Benji was a little disheveled and his glasses had fallen off. He didn't seem to be hurt though.

"You OK?" Gavin asked as he checked him over and Miles retrieved his glasses from the snow.

"I fell," Benji said pitifully. He was visibly holding back tears as Gavin straightened his cap and brushed snow off him.

"There are things hiding under the snow that can trip you up. That's why you fell. You're fine now, but it's OK to cry if you want," Gavin told him, but Benji denied it.

"No," Benji said and shook his head. Squaring his tiny shoulders, he looked so adorably determined as his lower lips stuck out and trembled a little.

Miles was done cleaning his glasses and handed them to Gavin, who put the glasses back on Benji. As Benji blinked at him unhappily, Gavin told him. "It's OK not to cry too. Your choice."

"Cocoa," Benji whispered.

"I guess his choice is hot cocoa," Miles said.

"Good thinking," Gavin praised him. "Come on, we've been out here long enough. Let's go drink something warm and maybe they'll even have some cookies."

Benji jumped at the mention of cookies.

"I'll pull you in the sled if you want," Miles offered and Benji took him up on it. His tumble in the snow forgotten, his cheeks rosy, a smile never leaving his face, Benji was a happy boy.

Back at the B&B, they put away the sled. They went from the shed to the house with Benji leading the way, his little legs marching in a purposeful stride. Once they climbed onto the porch, Benji knew to stomp his feet. He stomped back and forth and up and down the length of the porch, his steps as big as he could make them.

"I think all the snow is off now," Gavin told him.

Turning, Benji looked out at all the snow around them then back at Gavin in confusion.

"That's why we stomp our feet, to get the snow off our boots," Gavin explained.

Seeing Benji looking down at his boots, Miles asked him, "Why did you think we were stomping around?"

"For fun," Benji said reasonably.

"That makes sense," Miles told him.

"Let's go inside and have something warm to drink," Gavin said and herded them indoors.

In the foyer, Gavin pulled off Benji's knit cap then combed through his messed up hair with his fingers. "There. You look good now," Gavin said as Benji grinned up at him.

He swapped his boots for bear slippers he had stashed under the stairs then they all went into the kitchen.

"Look at that, hot coca and gingerbread guys," Miles said seeing a platter with cookies.

Benji corrected him. "Men. Gingerbread men."

Miles move on to the next version. "Ginger-dudes?"

"This again," Gavin said but Miles pressed on.

"Ginger-bros!"

Gavin shook his head at him.

"Looks like your dad is on your side," Miles said to Benji.

"He knows it's gingerbread men. Everybody knows," Benji insisted and looked from his dad to Allan, who was doing food inventory in the kitchen.

"I never discuss politics with guests," Allan said, refusing to take sides.

They munched on cookies, and Benji and Miles had cocoa while Gavin drank tea. Benji made sure to eat over the plate and cupped the mug of hot cocoa with both hands. Without raising the mug off the table, he tilted it carefully to drink.

"No one will get mad if you make a little bit of a mess," Gavin told him.

Once again Benji was looking at Allen for confirmation.

"That's right. It's all part of being in the hospitality industry," Allan told him.

Benji didn't quite understand that but he seemed a little reassured.

When they were done with their snack, it was time to get ready for the afternoon outing Gavin had planned. Remembering the bathroom situation on the top floor, Miles went bounding up the stairs two at a time. Gavin had to restrain Benji so he wouldn't follow his lead.

Dressed up a little but still bundled up to keep warm, they went for a drive. They stopped at a few charming stores and saw a lot of pretty scenery. Just as it started to get dark, they pulled into the parking lot for Beau Verre, the greenhouse restaurant. Their timing was just right. Lights had been strung up all along the panels that made up the building, and it made for a beautiful sight in the snowy woods.

Benji looked at it like it was some kind of magical place, possibly Santa's house. Going inside was like walking into a different world. There were plants and flowers everywhere and it smelled like spring. Each table was secluded by greenery and had a view of the snow outside through the glass wall.

While Benji explored the indoor jungle, Miles picked up the menu. He was about to open it, but first he leaned across the table and asked Gavin, "Have I told you that you have the best ideas and that I love you for it?"

"They only serve healthy, vegetarian food here," Gavin informed him.

"That doesn't diminish my love for you one bit," Miles told him and made Gavin smile.

Chapter 28

"Miles. Miles," Gavin called softly as he knocked on the door of Miles' room. Earlier that evening he had some silly idea that maybe he didn't have to barge into Miles' room every single night they stayed there. So much for that. A couple of sleepless hours spent trying to convince himself that he could stay away from Miles for one night, at least, and here he was, knocking gently, impatient for him to open the door.

Finally he heard an indistinct grumble from inside. The low knock and Gavin's hushed voice must have penetrated through the door and to Miles' sleeping brain. As Gavin waited, the only sounds were Miles' footsteps creaking on the floorboards as he stumbled to the door. He opened the door wide and looked relieved for some reason when he found Gavin standing there.

"At first I thought I was only dreaming. Then I got tangled in the covers. And when you stopped knocking, I got worried you gave up on me and left," Miles explained and threw himself into his arms.

"I don't give up that easily," Gavin said and circled his waist with his arms as he backed him into the room and closed the door quietly.

"I like the sound of that. Now get over here and warm me up," Miles demanded. He took hold of Gavin's hands from his lower back and put them on his ass.

"You want me to maul you?" Gavin asked as he pulled him close against him by groping his ass.

"I'll take mauling. Fondling is fine. Groping too. I just want some contact so I can steal your body heat," Miles said and started grinding into him.

There was no light in the room, just a reddish glow coming from the fireplace. Gavin dragged one of his hands off Miles' ass still in the sweatpants he wore to sleep. His hand moved up to rest on the back of Miles' neck as Gavin kissed him deeply, letting his tongue explore his mouth.

Miles moaned and it carried all through him. He was still driving his body to rub against Gavin in a slow rhythm while his hands were squeezing his ass through his pajama bottoms. Both their cocks were hard, stroking against each other through layers of fabric. At this rate, Gavin couldn't take much more of his grinding. Already his throbbing need for Miles wouldn't ease up. Miles was driving him crazy.

In a harsh whisper, Gavin told him to hold still and started stripping him while Miles cursed under his breath. He eased his sweatpants over Miles' cock and watched it spring free and irresistible. Naked with firelight dancing over his skin, Miles looked amazing. But he didn't stay still for long. He was on Gavin, stripping him out of his clothes as

well.

With him now standing there naked, Miles' grasping hands and eager mouth ranged all over his body, telling Gavin how much he wanted this. Miles hardly paused as Gavin guided him toward the bed. But then Gavin pushed him down and Miles let out a complaining growl.

"Come on let me love you," Gavin told him as he climbed on the bed and hovered over him.

"When you put it like that, how can I refuse," Miles said and pulled him down to lie on top of him.

Feeling his way over his body in the dark, mapping it with his hands, Gavin kissed him everywhere. When he moved down, Miles' cock proved irresistible. His mouth went to it, needing to taste it and feel it, needing to satisfy him more than anything.

As Miles writhed under him, Gavin held on to his thighs, enjoying the tensing of his muscles under his hands. Miles' fingers tangled in his hair as his chest heaved. He could tell Miles was stifling his cries as Gavin took his cock deep. Gavin didn't want to test the limits of his self-control and risk waking the whole house. He moved fast, sucking hard as Miles choked back his moans.

He kept one hand on Miles balls and trailed the other one up the length of Miles' body. Hand moving up over his chest, the column of his throat then cupping Miles' jaw, he finally clamped it over his mouth. Now Gavin sucked him for all he was worth, and in no time he was taking his come down his throat.

While Miles was still gasping through the aftershocks and calling his name in a hoarse whisper, Gavin groped his way up his body and kissed him hard. Along the way, Gavin let him feel how hard he was for him. One arm around his neck, Miles was kissing him and also reaching down to take hold of his cock.

"I want this," he told Gavin and turned him to lie on his back under him.

Now Miles was moving down his body, letting his lips brush his skin until his mouth was at his cock. His lips teased the head with a soft kiss then his tongue darted out and swirled the head. Miles moved on. His tongue followed after his hand as it stroked the shaft. The caress of his tongue over the aching hardness of Gavin's cock drove him wild.

Gavin was cursing under his breath then groaning as Miles let his cock enter his mouth in slow motion. He pulled up and went deeper each time. More of his length disappeared between Miles' lips while he looked up at Gavin with a challenge in his eyes. Every time he was taking him deeper, and Gavin knew he couldn't last.

His eyes locked on him, Miles' head bobbed faster until Gavin couldn't take any more. He was gritting his teeth and coming. Holding back his moans, he drank in the sight of Miles greedily swallowing his

come. Both of them spent, Miles rubbed his head against Gavin's thigh then crawled up to drop into his arms. They kissed until they started to feel the cold air on their naked skin.

As Miles shivered against him, Gavin pulled up the covers snuggly around them. What did he think he was doing? He couldn't stay. Reminded of that unfortunate fact, Gavin groaned unhappily as he pulled away from Miles with a kiss. Reluctantly, he untangled himself from the thick covers and from Miles too. As he did, he knew this wouldn't do. Every day it got harder to leave Miles or to let him go to his own bed at home. Fixing that problem was going to be his New Year's resolution.

The next morning, Gavin and Benji watched Miles turn into a zombie as he followed the smell of bacon down the stairs and to the kitchen. They went into the kitchen after him. Ron was serving up food to the guests who were already seated at the big table.

"Do you know what this man made? Not bacon and pancakes. Bacon pancakes. This man is an evil genius!" Miles exclaimed as his eyes twinkled in Ron's direction.

"I would say just plain evil," Gavin said though he couldn't resist putting a couple of the evil pancakes on his plate when Ron brought a fresh batch. He didn't have them with syrup however just a dab of butter. Then he ate them like he was an unwilling accessory to a crime. Benji was skeptical and ate his pancake with no toppings, holding it with the fingertips of both hands, biting into it cautiously like he thought it might bite back.

Miles, on the other hand, enjoyed his pancakes to the fullest. He even did a running commentary. "Crunchy chunks of bacon in every bite, the shot of the pure sweetness of real maple syrup – it's heaven."

Noticing his shameless enjoyment of his handiwork, Ron nodded with approval. "A man who knows how to enjoy his food. You did well for yourself, my friend," he said to Gavin.

"You reeled in a good one," Allan agreed.

"You mean I reeled in a good one," Miles said. "Seriously, I'm one lucky guy." He looked from Gavin to Benji, his expression full of love. How could they not love him back.

Gavin had been getting an update from Meredith while Benji squirmed impatiently and stared out of the window. It was as if he thought the snow might all melt before his very eyes. Since Benji was ready to burst if he didn't get to go out for his last taste of playing in the snow, Miles took him outside. Gavin said he would catch up to them. It had snowed last night so he would have no trouble following their tracks.

It turned out there was no need for any tracking. When he was done with his call, Gavin found the two of them waiting for him on the front porch. Benji was bouncing around, eager to get going, while Miles was shifting from one foot to the other to keep warm.

"I thought you couldn't wait to get started," Gavin said as Benji grabbed his hand eagerly.

Miles laughed. "That was the idea, but then your son said, 'No. We can't start without Dad.'"

"So you two just came out here to freeze. That was sweet of you," Gavin told them as they set off.

They hiked out heading to some new spots to do a little sledding and get into a few snowball fights. On the way, it started snowing. Feathery snowflakes fell all around, so light they seemed to hang suspended in mid air. Benji squealed and tried to catch them. Mostly they caught on his fuzzy hat and his clothes. Then Miles picked him up and put him on his shoulders as if to put him closer to the action.

Watching him and Miles, Gavin had never been so happy. He still had to deal with a lingering fear that it might all disappear. In his experience happiness was fragile and fleeting, like a snowflake you catch in the palm of your hand, which then melts so quickly that you hardly have time to appreciate it. All of his happiness was embodied in two people that he loved more than anything – Benji and Miles. And right then as snow fell all around, Gavin knew without a doubt that he wanted a future with Miles.

He found that somewhere along the way all his doubts about Miles had dropped away. Miles didn't seem serious but he was solid through and through when it counted. Now he looked at him with the rising sun behind him like a halo, and all Gavin wanted was to always be there for him and share his happiness with him.

Chapter 29

Well into midmorning, the snowfall stayed light and didn't get in the way of their fun. Once it intensified, Gavin decided they better start back while they could still see.

"Come on, let's go back to the B&B before we get caught in a snowstorm," Gavin said to get them moving. According to the weather forecast there wasn't much chance of a major snowstorm, but that wasn't necessarily good news to Benji.

"I want to get caught in a snowstorm," he said.

"A snowstorm isn't as much fun as it sounds," Miles said. "But we want to go and visit our snowmen don't we? And they are back that way." Miles pointed back the way they came.

Benji was eager to go now that his beloved snowmen were involved. They arrived at the clearing where their snowmen waited amid gentle snow flurries. The three snowmen stood together, a smiling threesome, and Benji ran over to them.

"They still look good, huh," Miles said as he adjusted the twig one of them had for a nose.

Some of the pennies had fallen off and they looked for them in the snow. Suddenly Benji stopped. Turning to him, Gavin saw that he seemed to be near tears. Gavin took him in his arms and asked him what was the matter.

"Snowmens melt. They melt like in the story," Benji said mournfully.

Gavin remembered that one of the books about snowmen had the snowman melt at the end. Even if the little guy wouldn't get to see it for himself, Gavin could hardly tell Benji that wouldn't happen to these snowmen too.

While Gavin comforted Benji, Miles came to crouch in front of him. "Don't be sad for the snowmen yet. Look at them. They have big smiles on their faces. And look at those funny noses. How can anyone be sad when he has a pinecone for a nose, or a twig? Those are some happy guys."

"But they'll melt," Benji said and blinked away tears.

"Snow fun can't last forever. There is Cupid and then the Easter Bunny waiting in line. Everybody has to take a turn. And the snowmen will be back next year, good as new," Miles told him.

"They'll come back?" Benji asked.

"Sure they will," Gavin confirmed.

"Like Momo?" Benji said, growing more animated.

"Yes. Just like that," Gavin said.

"Where are the snowmens gonna go? Far away?" Benji wondered.

Miles was ready with an answer. "North Pole."

"With Santa?" Benji asked, his eyes growing wide.

"Where else? Santa and the snowmen are friends. They have to stick together," Miles told him.

"Like you and me," Benji told him.

"Yes. Exactly," Miles said and a big grin lit up his face. "Now let's put back the pennies so we can make these snowmen look good. Then we can take some pictures with them."

More cheerful now, Benji went back to digging pennies out of the snow, though some of them had to come from Miles' pockets. Gavin did steal a moment to lean in and kiss Miles on the cheek.

"What was that for?" Miles asked.

"Just for being you," Gavin told him.

Benji had fun posing for the pictures, and he was only a little sad when they left and waved goodbye to the snowmen.

Back at the B&B, when he had a moment alone with Miles, Gavin gave him a soft kiss and told him. "You are really good with Benji."

"It's our shared maturity level," Miles said with a grin and locked his arms around Gavin's waist.

Gavin nodded. "That must be it."

"Don't agree with me," Miles said and pulled him tighter against him so he could glare at him at close range.

"I think it's because you're a great guy," Gavin told him more seriously, but he still couldn't help smiling when he looked into those fiercely beautiful eyes.

After they warmed up and had a good lunch, they went out for more fun in the snow. It had stopped snowing and that disappointed Benji. The little guy really had his heart set on getting caught in a blizzard. Miles tried to juggle some snowballs though Benji seemed happiest when he dropped them.

They packed in as much snow time as they could and left snow angels everywhere they went. At the end of the day, they were all exhausted, happy and ready to eat.

Ron made a special dinner for their last day. There was no doubt that Gavin's little group got special treatment, but the other guests got to benefit from it too. They were joined by the newlyweds, Jin and Brianna, and Vivian, the quiet, older woman who always had either a crossword or a book in her hand. Their farewell dinner was a rib roast with multicolored fingerling potatoes and huge carrot slices.

The size of the rib roast prompted Miles to ask, "Are we eating a dinosaur?"

Benji was the first to answer. "No." He shook his head vehemently but then he turned to Ron to make sure. "Right?"

Realizing that the idea of eating dinosaurs might upset Benji, Miles backtracked immediately. "Of course not, my mistake." Then he leaned over toward Gavin to whisper, "Are dinosaurs off limits? He did bite a head off a snowman, as I recall."

"Where candy is concerned, anything goes," Gavin whispered back.

Benji saw them with their heads together, and he told Allan. "They're being boyfriends again."

Miles leaned over to stage whisper to Benji, "Or maybe we were just talking about you."

"Me?"

"Aha. We were saying how you were a great kid," Miles said to him.

Benji already looked tiny sitting in a regular-sized chair. As he got shy and scrunched down, he looked even smaller. Seeing him like that, Gavin had to kiss his little red cheek. Now it seemed like Benji was getting ready to crawl under the table and hide.

Brianna suddenly spoke up. "He's just too adorable. We need to go upstairs and make a kid right now," she said to Jin.

Everyone stared at her, including Benji. The newlyweds were always so absorbed in each other, it was hard to believe they were even aware anyone else existed. But they had noticed Benji and how cute he was. They didn't go upstairs to make one of their own right at that moment, but what she said did leave Benji puzzled. Gavin thought he might have some explaining to do about exactly how two people go about making a kid, but then Ron and Miles distracted Benji with side dishes, and Gavin was saved for now.

After dinner, Ron used a special contraption to roast chestnuts over the fire.

"Roasted chestnuts? Wow. You guys don't kid around," Miles said. "I only had them once before. It took work to peel them, but they were tasty."

Benji had never tried them "Are they really good?" he asked.

"I made them. Of course they are good," Ron assured him.

Benji made a face that told him that he was reserving judgment until he got to try them for himself. Gavin peeled one for him and Benji took it and had a bite. "It is good," he decided.

Once Benji was to sleep on the couch, they had a more adult treat – warm, spiced brandy. Brianna and Jin wrapped themselves in blankets and went to drink theirs on the front porch. Vivian retreated to her room with the brandy and a book. That left Miles, Gavin, Allan and Ron sitting on cushions by the fireside. Ron poured his concoction for Gavin and Miles.

"Warm booze? And this is a thing people drink?" Miles asked.

"Yes," all three of them said in unison.

"It's heated gently, infused with spices and perfect for a cold winter's night," Ron said as his held his glass up to the firelight.

"So how is it?" Allan asked Miles. He should have been asking him for ID, but both he and Ron had assumed Miles was twenty-one. Gavin wasn't about to be a spoilsport about it.

"Hold on. Let me get comfortable, then I'll tell you," Miles said as he got closer to Gavin.

Gavin made room for him, shifting and putting his arm around him as Miles leaned into his embrace.

"Now it's perfect," Miles said and Gavin agreed. "Mmm toasty."

"Good liquor is wasted on him. He's drunk on Gavin," Allan said.

Miles didn't deny that he was right, "I think I am, actually." He turned and gave Gavin a light kiss on the lips, and he could taste the spices and the bite of alcohol. Then his hand slipped inside Gavin's, and he leaned back to rest against his chest once again.

Absently, Gavin brushed his fingertips over Miles' hair and he turned to him and smiled. With the glow of the fire in his eyes and highlighting his hair, Miles was absolutely gorgeous. Gazing at him, Gavin could almost forget that they weren't alone. It was so easy to lose himself in his eyes. Looking at him like this, a thought occurred to Gavin, or more like a deep yearning or a wish – he wanted this forever.

Chapter 30

On New Year's Day, Miles went over to Gavin's apartment to starve. They were going over to Bruce's party, and he had warned them to arrive hungry. "The last thing a host wants to hear is that you already ate." That's what Bruce said according to Gavin.

Miles had agreed to his New Year's plan days ago, but Gavin felt like he still had to sell him on it. "It might not be the height of excitement, but Bruce's party is our best bet. And yes, his house is nice, but the party is casual. With Marvin there, Benji will have company. There is a park nearby. Bruce said we would have a group outing to go watch the fireworks over there."

"Sounds good," Miles said and gave him an easy, reassuring smile.

"I just want you to enjoy yourself," Gavin told him.

"And I just want to ring in the New Year with you," Miles said. "Everything else is gravy." Miles then made a miserable face. "Now I'm hungry all over again."

Only Benji got to eat a proper dinner, but unfortunately he had been awake all day. That wasn't Gavin's plan. "I was hoping Benji might take a nap, but he's way too excited." Fireworks, a party and a whole new year – that was a lot of excitement to keep bottled up inside one little boy.

Miles turned to him. "Maybe we could draw some fireworks."

"I don't know how," Benji said.

Miles had him get his crayons and some paper then he sat down with him at the coffee table. "This is how you draw fireworks," he said then he demonstrated. "They started in the center. They go up then they come down in all different directions. And use all the colors." His fireworks didn't look like much and neither did Benji's, but drawing them kept him occupied.

That didn't mean that all his impatience was gone. "When is midnight?" Benji asked.

"You pretty much answered your own question," Miles said. Then he told him, "It's not soon. It's later." He figured those were concepts he would understand.

Benji seemed satisfied with that and went back to drawing more fireworks next to Miles.

A while later, Gavin called him to come and get ready. First Benji held up his drawing. "Like the real thing," Gavin said as he admired the riot of colors.

"You show him too," Benji said to Miles.

Miles held up his drawing. It wasn't that much different from Benji's

so Gavin couldn't tell him what he really thought of it. "Almost as good as Benji's. Now let's go get ready."

Gavin ruffled Benji's hair and he flatted it down. Benji then turned to Miles, "Dad messed up my hair. Did I fix it good?"

"It is a special occasion. Maybe we should comb it," Miles said.

"Again!" Benji complained.

"When did you comb it last anyway?" Gavin asked him, giving him a suspicious look.

"This morning," Benji said.

"Sorry to ruin all your hard work," Gavin teased him, but Benji nodded in agreement and gave him a stern look.

Ready and armed with a bottle of champagne, they arrived at Bruce's and even managed to find parking along the street, not far from his house. The house was big, built like a modern, stylized version of a lodge. It was surrounded by woods, and Gavin said there was even a stream nearby. Though other houses weren't that far off, they were hidden by tall evergreens that grew on all sides.

As they went up the path to the front door, they could hear music and see guests moving around behind the big windows. They rang the doorbell but it took a little bit of time before anyone came to the door. Benji was bouncing excitedly as they waited on Bruce's porch.

Bruce's sister, Trudy, let them in eventually. She seemed a lot more down to earth than her brother. After quick introductions, she took charge of Benji and led him off so they could find Marvin. Taking off their coats, but not sure where to put them, Gavin and Miles moved on to the hub of the party. It was a big living space that opened up to a deck. The deck overlooked the back yard, which seamlessly blended into the woods.

At the center of the room, a rustic looking wooden table was loaded down with food, and a line had already formed as people piled goodies onto their plates. Miles noticed that it wasn't chips and dip either. There were fancy cheeses and hors d'oeuvres.

"Now I'm glad I got here hungry," Miles said seeing all the tempting food he wanted to try. To his credit, he didn't rush off to start stuffing his face yet. They still needed to say hi to their host and put away their coats.

While looking for him, they spotted Benji who had met up with Marvin. Now the two of them were running around with Marvin's little dog, Fuzzy, in tow. Marvin was wearing all his winter gear so Benji kept his on too. Benji was delighted when Fuzzy ran all around him then out the door. The boys then tore out of there, chasing after the dog.

Gavin had found Bruce, and he pointed out where he was hiding. A

line had formed at a well stocked mini bar. That's where Bruce and another good-looking guy were handing out drinks, but they weren't easy to see behind the wall of people who had gathered there.

When he saw them, Bruce came over to join them. "Don't worry about the kids. They are better off outside where they won't be bumping into people and spilling drinks. There are a few other kids out there and my sister is keeping an eye on them."

"This is a great house," Miles told him.

"I know. I used to love bringing guys here," Bruce said with a grin.

"There is a Jacuzzi in the back," Gavin informed Miles.

"It's wasted on me now. Everything changed when I got Marvin. But he loved this place on first sight." Seeing that Gavin was looking at the guy behind the bar, Bruce told him, "That's Matt. A man of many skills. Some of which I am making use of tonight."

"Are you two dating?" Miles asked.

Bruce looked back at Matt appreciatively, but then said, "No. I meant his drink mixing skills. But I did borrow him especially for tonight. I didn't want you and your hot, young thing to show me up at my own party." He eyed Gavin then Miles.

Bruce then went off to greet more guests after telling Miles and Gavin to put away their coats in a guest bedroom. With their hands free, they grabbed some drinks and milled around the big living room.

"He sounded jealous," Miles said with a smirk as he watched Bruce playing the host.

"And you are enjoying it?" Gavin accused him.

"Sure I am. I want everyone to be jealous of us," Miles said and put his arm around Gavin.

Going over to the sliding glass doors that went out onto the deck, they opened them and went out to check on Benji. A little while ago, when they were driving here, Benji was covering his yawns with both hands. Now he was running all around the yard, full of energy.

They saw him, Marvin and that fuzzy little dog chasing each other, but who was chasing who could change pretty fast. There were other kids there as well as Bruce's sister, who was yelling at them to stay inside the lighted areas. Gavin waved to her and she waved back. With all the running around they were doing, the kids were warm enough, but Miles and Gavin hurried back inside.

It was a fun party. There was dancing later on, and meeting people kept Miles busy so he didn't get to eat as much as he planned. Benji and the other kids came in and danced too. Before they knew it, it was almost midnight. Miles heard the familiar sound of fireworks whistling. He turned just in time to see the first ones burst.

More fireworks exploded across the sky, and Benji started clapping

like crazy. Everyone crowded onto the deck and champagne was popped loudly to much applause. The kids loved it. Good thing Bruce got to do it a few times as the bottles got emptied. Everyone toasted the New Year.

There were hugs and kisses being shared all around, but for Gavin and Miles, Benji came first. They both hugged him and gave him a kiss as he laughed and yelled, "Happy New Year!" Then they turned to each other. Gavin said, "Happy New Year" in a hushed, sexy voice, but the words caught in Miles' throat. He only managed a choked off, "You too" before he had to kiss Gavin.

Gavin and Miles kissed too long, but they just couldn't stop. If they hadn't promised Benji to go to see the fireworks at the park, they might have never pulled apart. A group of guests was going to see the show. As they followed a path among the trees, and the kids jumped and squealed, they could watch the fireworks even before they got there. Since they had arrived late, their group found itself at the back of the crowd. Miles hoisted Benji to sit on his shoulders and pushed his way through the throng.

"I guess sometimes it's good to be rude," Gavin mumbled under his breath. That wasn't a sentiment he wanted Benji to hear.

Fireworks filled the sky, their colors vibrant like flowers in bloom. Overlapping, their colors combined at the edges, growing more beautiful all the time. They all enjoyed the show, but to Benji this was real life magic. He hardly seemed to blink.

The lights flowering in the night sky then dispersing dazzled his eyes so that the little guy was open-mouthed and speechless. Benji clapped and then raised his arms, his fingers spread like he wanted to make a grab for the bursting lights. The alternating colors reflected brightly in his glasses and he looked up with awe and happiness written on his face.

Miles looked from Benji to Gavin. The glow of fireworks on their faces and in their eyes was even more beautiful than what was happening in the sky. Gavin met his gaze and they smiled at each other then shared a quick kiss.

The fireworks seemed endless as another outburst of color took the place of the last, but eventually it was over and they made their way back to the house. Benji was already showing signs of being tired, but he refused to let either Miles or Gavin carry him.

They spent more time at Bruce's but Benji couldn't hold out. It was a miracle he lasted this long. Along with Marvin, he was asleep in his bedroom. Eventually, Gavin scooped him up from the bunk bed in there, a tiny sleeping bundle with his glasses askew.

Going to the car, Miles climbed in the back from the other side so he could help get Benji into his car seat without waking him. The little

guy did sort of wake up, but after a little mumbling, his eyes closed again. Gavin took off his glasses, folded them up then kissed him on the forehead.

Miles grinned at him then got into the front seat. It was a quiet drive with that sweet boy sleeping in the back. From time to time, Miles leaned his head on Gavin's shoulder, but otherwise he behaved himself. He was saving the misbehavior for when they got to Gavin's place.

In front of the apartment building, Miles helped get Benji out of the car and put his glasses in the pocket of his jacket for safekeeping. With the sleeping Benji gathered up in Gavin's arms and Miles assisting, they went up.

Benji was snug in his bed with Momo in no time at all, and Miles was waiting for Gavin in his bedroom.

Miles stood at the window and saw city lights and no sign of fireworks. He could still see them every time he blinked though. Almost silently, Gavin came up behind him and put his arms around him. The feel of his tight, lean body against his back made Miles breathe hard right away. Then Gavin kissed his neck and Miles purred.

Gavin gripped him in a tight embrace, and his lips on his neck felt so good. Miles was melting from the hard feel of his body and the soft lips, the muscled arms locked around his chest and the tongue tracing lines along the edge of his ear, teeth at his earlobe, the firm legs against the back of his and the wet heat of Gavin's mouth on his neck.

"Tell me I'm staying the night," Miles said as he swayed a little in Gavin's arms.

"Not just tonight," Gavin said in a husky voice.

Miles turned around to face him. "You have something to say to me?" Miles challenged him.

Curling his fingers around the collar of his shirt, Gavin pulled Miles hard against him. "You're mine."

"Aha," Miles agreed as his heart raced and his breath hitched. His whole body heated just from the sound of Gavin's voice and the look in his eyes. Then Gavin kissed him and he was on fire.

When he pulled back, Gavin spoke in a more measured tone. "I want you to move in and I want us to get married, but I'm not sure in what order. So I'll just keep you from ever leaving and see what happens."

Pushing his fingers through Gavin's dark hair, losing himself in his eyes, Miles was amazed by him. He was still trying to absorb what Gavin said about moving in and getting married. "Who are you?"

"A man in love. A man who's crazy about you," Gavin told him.

"It sounds like we want the same things, we just need to figure out

the timing," Miles said.

"So it's happening," Gavin said and pulled him into a hug so intense it hurt.

"Without a doubt," Miles told him as Gavin loosened his hold on him but didn't let him go.

"I love you," Gavin said then he kissed him and took him to bed.

He said it over and over again as they made love. Miles said it back just as many times, the words echoing in his heart. Looking into those blue eyes, Miles saw his whole life from this moment on and sheer joy suffused him.

*

Gavin woke to vivid memories of making love to Miles to the constant rhythm of I love you. Every touch and every kiss was burned into him, and he lost himself as last night replayed itself. Miles was an inferno and he wanted to burn alive inside of him. Gavin could have fucked him forever.

Lying next to him, face half buried in the pillow, Miles was an irresistible temptation. Gavin reached for him then stopped. Early morning sunlight was streaming in through the window, and Gavin realized he didn't dare start anything. Benji would be up soon, if he wasn't already.

Sliding his hand under the covers and down Miles' back to the curve of his ass, Gavin woke him up with kisses on his shoulders and down his back. When Miles' eyelids fluttered but his eyes refused to open, he nudged him.

Still refusing to open his eyes, Miles informed him, "There are only two ways to wake me – blow job and coffee. My choice would be both."

"Don't get comfortable. It's time to get up," Gavin told him.

Miles mumbled, "OK. I'll give you a head start." He kept on dozing as Gavin got up and went to get ready. He decided to get some coffee going so he could entice Miles out of bed.

From the bathroom door, he heard Miles say, "When I move in, we'll need a new bed."

"How big a bed do you need?" Gavin wondered.

"Actually I need a smaller bed that way you can't run away from me."

"I'm not going anywhere," Gavin told him.

"Me either."

Gavin was in the kitchen peeled an orange for Benji when Miles came in. They only had time for a quick kiss before Benji came from his room and joined them.

"Good morning, Miles," he said, happy to see him.

"Good morning," Miles said and then Benji fixed him with an inquiring gaze.

"Miles slept with me in my room. That's because Miles and I are serious about each other," Gavin explained.

"Serious?" Benji said and looked at Miles like he couldn't quite connect that word with him.

"Serious means that we'll get married some day," Miles said then looked over at Gavin smugly. "Just trying to speed things up."

"Marv said if his dad gets married, he'll have two dads. What about me?" Benji asked and looked from Gavin to Miles.

"That's right. You'll have two dads too," Gavin confirmed it and Miles' turned to him with a look of pure love.

Benji stepped closer to Miles and looked at him critically as a potential father figure. "Dad doesn't get mad even if I spill something. Are you gonna get mad?" he asked Miles.

"Nope. Spill all you want," Miles said then he corrected himself. "No, wait. Only spill sometimes."

"I don't want to spill," Benji said, looking at Miles like he was crazy.

"Oh, OK. You don't have to spill if you don't want to," Miles told him with a grin. "Just know that we'll all be happy together."

After breakfast, when Benji went to brush his teeth, they had a moment alone. Gavin took Miles in his arms tenderly.

"When you said that about me being Benji's dad, I swear my heart soared," Miles confessed. "So I guess you're not worried about me any more?"

"No. I love you and I believe in you," Gavin told him. "But I can hardly believe you came back to me."

"I had to. I couldn't live without you," Miles said with a shaky smile.

"I'm so glad you did. There would always be a hole in my life if you hadn't. You make me so happy," Gavin said. Looking into those beautiful, loving eyes he was ready to give Miles everything, all that he was and his whole life too. The feeling was so powerful and real, Gavin knew he would never let him go.

The end

A Christmas Boyfriend

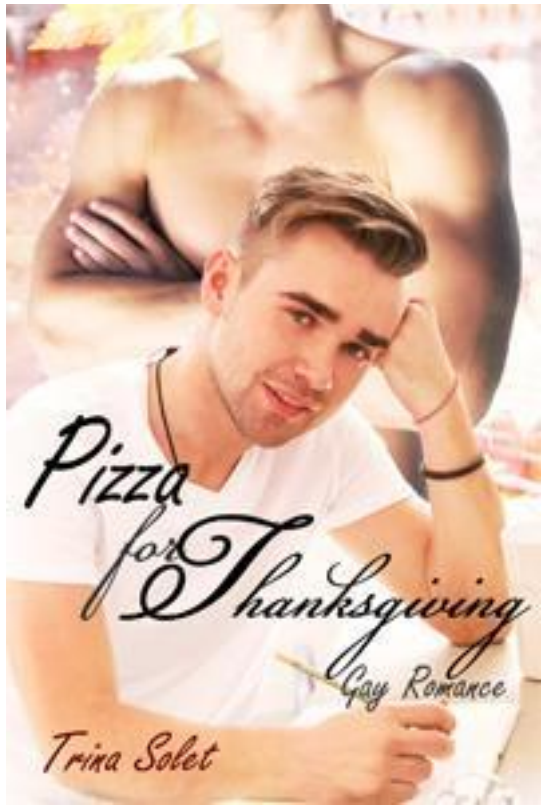
"Can you get me a man for Christmas?"

When he said those fateful words, Ben didn't know what he was setting in motion.

Ben is a busy dad to a four year old little girl. He doesn't have much time for a social life, but he wasn't serious when he asked for a man for Christmas. His daughter, Maya, doesn't know that. She is determined to play Santa and get her dad the gift he asked for.

The man she picks for her dad is her preschool teacher, Jason Kenney. Neither Jason nor Maya think he's the right man to be a present for Ben, so why is he standing there on Christmas Eve with a gift bow in his hair?

Smarting from a recent breakup, Jason isn't looking forward to the holidays. Despite his reservations, Jason gets tangled up with Ben. There is something about Ben that he just can't resist. As their feelings intensify, will spending Christmas together turn into something more?



Pizza for Thanksgiving

Mack and Enzo are roommates and nothing more. While sharing the same apartment, they live separate lives. Enzo is sweet but painfully shy. Mack is gruff and kind of intimidating. He's had a hard life and doesn't let his guard down easily.

Now Mack is anticipating a lonely Thanksgiving dinner, but Enzo won't let that happen. When he hears that Mack is going to be all alone for Thanksgiving, he gets up the courage to make him an offer. But things don't go as planned in more ways than one.

With the best of intentions, Enzo has woken up something in Mack that he might not be ready for. Can Mack stop hiding and holding back? When Enzo asks for too much from him, can he say yes anyway?

The Professor and the Manny

Ned needs a babysitter for his daughter, Mina. When he hires Jeff, he ends up with a manny and so much more.

Mina is a vulnerable child who has endured too many losses. Ned has given her a new life, but she doesn't come out of her shell for just anyone.

When Jeff comes into their lives, he wins her over and starts out babysitting for only a few hours a day. That's long enough for him to realize that he's incredibly attracted to Ned.

Ned feels the same way, but he's a professor and Jeff is a student at his college. Ned is determined to keep his distance. That only lasts until he learns that Jeff has been keeping something from him. When Ned finds out that Jeff has no place to live, he invites him home and hires him as Mina's manny.

There's no turning back now. Living in the same house, neither man can deny his feelings for long. But when danger disrupts their happy life, Jeff blames himself. Can Ned convince him to stay? The next time danger strikes, Jeff might be the only one who can protect what's most precious to them both.

A Midnight Thanksgiving

Alex and Vaughn have been frenemies for a while, but they never spent any time alone together. That all changes on Thanksgiving night. When they become concerned about a friend in crisis, Alex and Vaughn are thrown together as they go in search of him.

The guys make an unlikely team. Alex thinks Vaughn is too uptight and would never be interested in a carefree guy like him. Vaughn thinks Alex is irresponsible, but being around him breaks down his resistance. The more time they spend together, the closer they get. By the end of the night, they can't keep their hands off each other. But will they admit how they really feel or will it all be over when their mission ends?

Key To His Heart

Phillip Morton is a disciplined and self-assured young executive, but that's only on the surface. His heart is in turmoil. He has just discovered that his late brother might have left behind a child. This child is only a rumor, a possibility, but Phillip sets out to find him.

To help him with his search, he brings along Leon, his assistant. Leon is very young and new to his job. Phillip doesn't want things between them to turn too personal, but he needs Leon to keep him sane.

Even as he searches for his nephew, Phillip is afraid to hope. After the heart-wrenching loss of his estranged brother, it seems too much to expect that this child could be real.

It turns out that Ant, short for Anthony Morton Junior, is very real indeed. He is a sweet three-year-old living in precarious circumstances with an elderly relative. Phillip has found them just in time.

As Leon lends a hand with all the new challenges in Phillip's life, the two of them are growing closer every day. If only Leon can free himself of the demons from his childhood. While Leon's past still haunts him, he and Phillip can't rush into anything.

Will Phillip's love and patience win out in the end so they can all become a family?

Golden Days

How can a nerdy, young dad hope to attract his hunky new neighbor? And if he can get his attention, does he have any hope of making it last?

Kyle only recently became an adoptive father to a vulnerable little girl. He's a devoted dad, and Viv is a spirited and loving five-year-old. With the help of his little dog, Kyle worked hard to gain Viv's love and trust in record time. Now they are a family. That doesn't mean he has no room for a man in his life.

Luke has been working in a string of nightclubs for most of his adult life. It was an exciting life, but Luke had enough of it. A recent loss sends Luke into suburbia in search of a more peaceful life. The loss of his brother is still fresh, but spending time with Kyle and Viv brings him so much joy.

In the past, Kyle hasn't been lucky in love. He always goes for the wrong kind of guy. But with Viv in his life, he can't afford those kinds of mistakes.

When Luke moves into the neighborhood, Kyle ends up with two wounded souls on his hands. Good thing he has room in his heart for both of them. If Kyle can get past his fears, he might just get everything he has always dreamed of.

Staying True

Freshly out and with no experience under his belt, Troy just wants to have fun. His roommate is the first guy he has been with.

When he and Spencer get together, it's strictly casual, or so they tell each other. But the truth is that with every kiss and every touch, they are becoming too close.

Spencer doesn't have a ton of self-confidence. There is no way a skinny nerd like him can keep a guy like Troy all to himself. But how long can Spencer pretend that his heart isn't set on Troy?

And how is Troy supposed to get the experience he craves if all he can think about is Spencer?

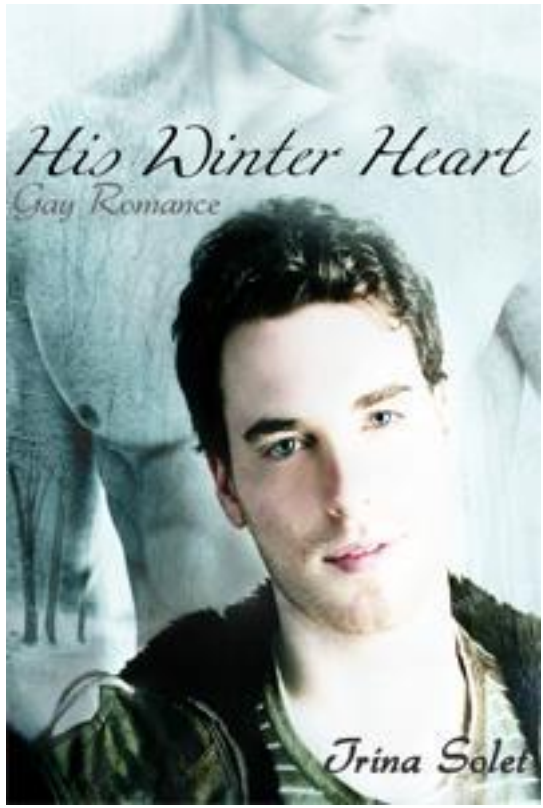
In the end, maybe all the experience Troy needs is the love of one man.

Where He Belongs

Jack thought he had everything only to end up without a wife, a best friend or a child. Now he is closed off and afraid to love. After despair nearly cost him his life, he can't afford another heartbreak. Burying himself in work, Jack has made business his whole life. Now a business opportunity has led him to Gus, the one man who can break down his defenses.

Gus doesn't know what he is getting himself into when he flirts with his new boss. The uptight younger man is irresistible to him. Is Gus being reckless when he falls for Jack despite all the warning signs? After all, Gus is a happy, single father to a little boy, and Josh is a happy kid.

As he is drawn into their lives, Jack finds that Gus and his little boy are everything he needs and what he is most afraid of. Jack can't risk his heart again, but he might be won over by these two goofballs despite himself.



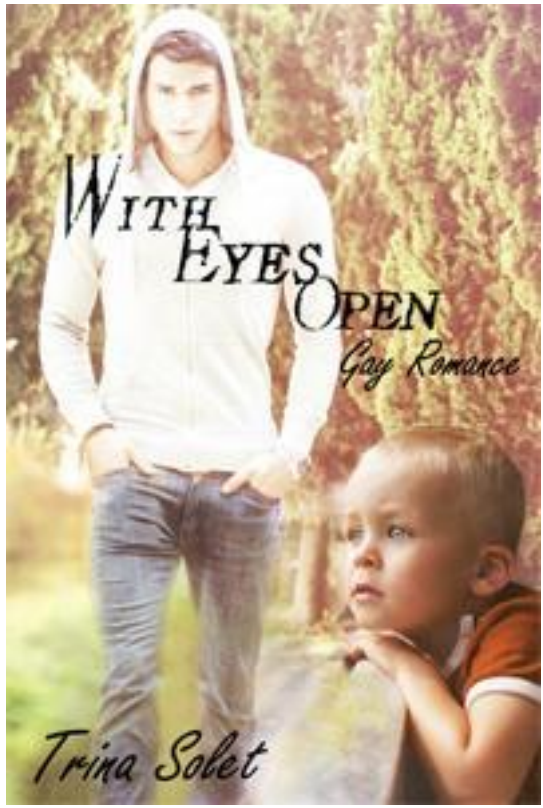
His Winter Heart

Wes is living a lonely, stark existence when he meets Colin, a lively young guy in desperate circumstances. Wes is so taken with him that he has to have him. His decision to invite Colin to spend the night is going to turn his quiet life upside down.

Colin almost finds himself sleeping on the street. When the tall, blond man makes him an offer, he can't say no either to the money or to the man. Colin is impulsive and full of contradictions. He refuses to sell himself for money and ends up homeless because of it. But when Wes offers to pay him for sex, Colin jumps at the chance to go home with him. Something about Wes strikes a chord with Colin. He knows there is a warm heart under the serious, impassive exterior and an awesome body under all the layers of winter clothes.

Things don't go as planned when Wes decides that Colin is too young and inexperienced and refuses to sleep with him. That doesn't mean that he can stay away from someone who shakes up his world.

The more time Colin spends with Wes, the more he wants him. Colin isn't shy about getting what he wants. His relentless pursuit might pay off if Wes doesn't let family complications and his fears about the future keep them apart. Will Wes let go of his inhibitions and allow himself to love the younger man?



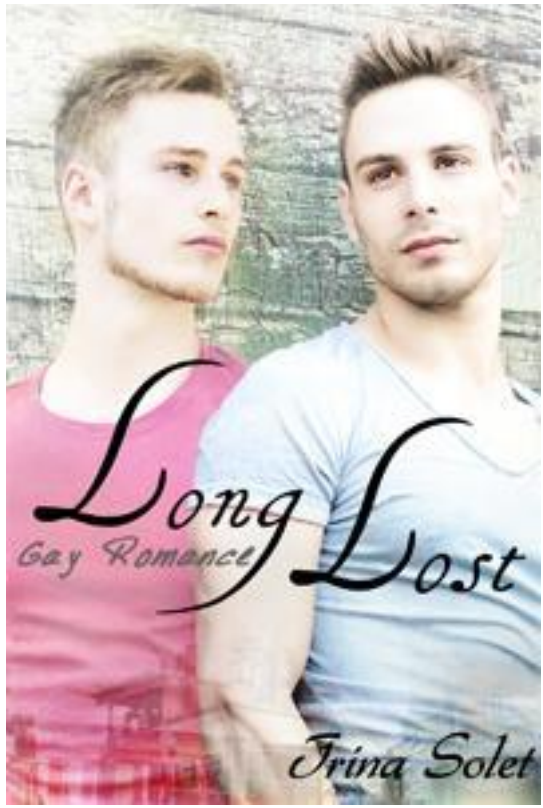
With Eyes Open

Jacob and his son, Toby, have just moved to a small town. Everything is going well so far, except for one thing – who is Toby talking to in the back garden? There's no one there.

Ian is wondering the same thing. He's taking time off from college to be with his dad. One day he sees the little boy acting strangely, and he decides to look into it.

While Ian is trying to solve the mystery of what Toby is seeing, he and Jacob grow closer. Jacob is a man Ian can trust and lean on at a difficult time. Jacob has some reservations about Ian, but his feelings are too strong to be denied. Even as unexplained events surround them, these two can't stay away from each other.

Good thing because when Ian finds the answers he's looking for, he's going to need Jacob more than ever.



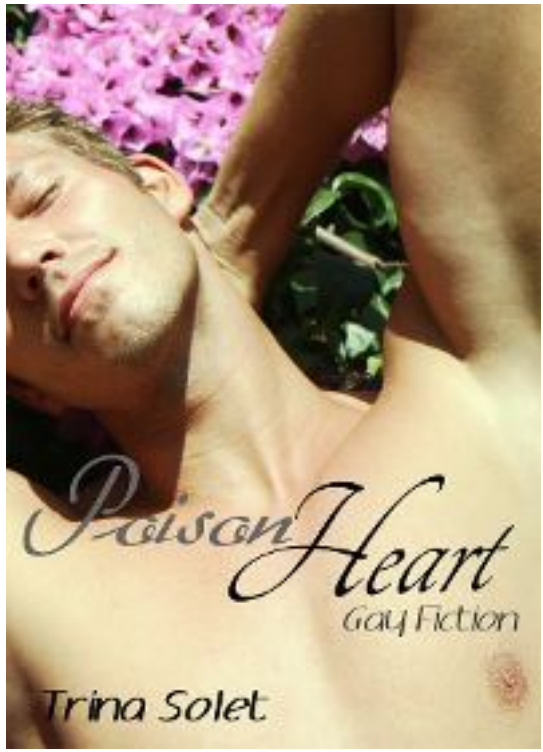
Long Lost

Blake Adler is back in town on a mission. Years ago Blake's father cut him out of his life so completely that he never spoke of him. Now that his father has passed away, Blake finally gets to meet his younger brother and sister. But Blake didn't come back to Meadowview for a reunion with his lost family. He's desperate to find the man he can't live without and win back the love he threw away.

Blake and Reese were once best friends. They could have been more, but Blake screwed up the most important relationship of his life. Now he wants to fix things with Reese, if he can only find him.

Blake isn't the only one looking for Reese. No matter how far Reese runs, trouble follows him. Wild and vulnerable, he always had it rough. The one good thing in his life was Blake.

Now Reese is taking a big risk coming back to town. It might be worth it if he can reclaim the man he can't stop thinking about, the one who rejected him, the one he loves more than anyone.

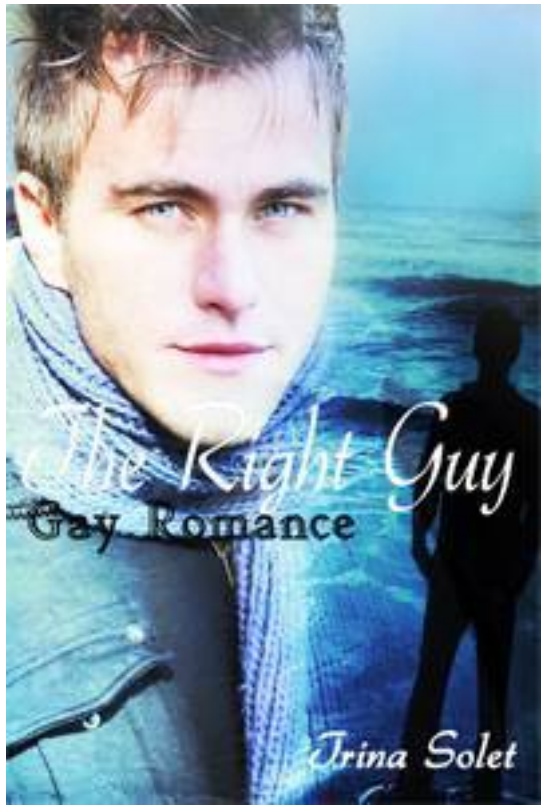


Poison Heart

Is there anything Vince and Cal won't do for each other? The two of them grew up together and fell deeply in love. They were poor but happy until Cal made a big mistake and ended up in jail. He did it for Vince. To get him out, Vince is willing to do anything. Roland Granger has the power and influence to make Cal a free man. All he wants in return is Vince. Even if Cal never forgives him, Vince is willing to sacrifice himself. Now he has to make sure that Cal accepts this unwanted help. And while Vince is trying to set things right in his own life, can he reunite Roland with a self-destructive young man who loves him?

His True Home

Alec has retreated to his childhood home after a life of too much fun. When a little boy is abandoned on the road leading to Alec's home town of Seaview Pines, Alec is the one who ends up taking care of him. Now Cory is on his way to join them. He was abandoned by his mother as well and wants to give Teddy, his little brother, the family he never had. As they spend time together, it's up to Cory to draw out the serious, silent little boy. He also has to convince Alec that his home town isn't just a temporary refuge. It's where all three of them belong.



The Right Guy

They came together in paradise, but what will happen when they go back to the real world and their everyday lives?

Nathan and Paul never liked each other. Paul was a snob, and Nathan felt like he was always looking down on him. Nathan wasn't interested in him anyway. He had his sights set on Turner. Now that Turner is getting married to another man, Nathan's heart is breaking. That's when he finds that Paul is right there by his side. This gorgeous man is ready to distract him and help him get over his unrequited crush.

After being with Paul, Nathan is finally ready to move on and let go of his hopeless feelings. But after a hot encounter on the beach, Nathan might be giving up his old crush for a new one. Knowing that his longing for Paul is just as hopeless, Nathan is at his wit's end.

But things aren't the way they seem. Paul has been watching Nathan pine after his friend for too long. All that time he has wanted Nathan all to himself. It's hard for Paul to believe that Nathan could ever return his feelings. After all, Nathan doesn't even like him.

He doesn't know that Nathan feels differently about him these days. When spending time with Paul stirs unexpected feelings that are more than lust, Nathan wonders if he misjudged this man. Could Paul be the

right man for him? After chasing the wrong guy for so long, Nathan has to prove to Paul that his feelings are real. That won't be easy. Paul isn't the most reasonable guy, and he won't settle for anything less from Nathan than his whole heart.

Possession

While looking for solitude, James finds love.

As soon as he arrives at the secluded, tropical villa, James knows he has found the ideal spot. Tranquil and remote, this place is just what he needs to get over a painful breakup. In perfect solitude, James's heart can begin to heal. But what if his solitude isn't so perfect, and Rob is. He is the young man who intrudes on James's privacy and steals his heart.

Rob is too much of a temptation for the cautious and uptight James. Even as he gives in to his desire, James reminds himself that this is just a vacation fling. Then why is the thought of leaving Rob tearing him apart? He can't get enough of the younger man. Once James has his body, he can't live without having his heart.

James thinks his yearning is hopeless. Then a revelation about Rob's circumstances changes everything. Will James have the courage to act on his feelings? He has to. This is his chance to have Rob, to give him the life he deserves and to truly love him.

Manny To The Rescue

Why would Owen be terrified of Connie and Maggie, his two adorable little nieces? Because he is about to be left alone with them. Owen thinks he is going to have to take care of his nieces by himself until Dan shows up. If Owen approves, Dan is ready to be the girls' manny. Right from the start, Dan is a big help and an even bigger temptation. And Owen isn't the only one being tempted. When he was younger, Dan had a crush on Owen. Now that he is living with him, Owen has never looked hotter. The crush is back in full force. Too bad Dan isn't the kind of guy Owen is into. But even a hint that he is interested might spur Dan to make a move. Unfortunately, Dan is bringing trouble with him, and he doesn't even know it. When Owen becomes a target, will Dan be there in time to save him?

And Manny Makes Three

Mark is a struggling college student who has been working as a nanny for a nice family, but they don’t need him any more. Zack has been raising his son, Al, by himself and needs help. Al is a funny kid, and Zack is a funny dad, but more serious issues lurk under the surface. Will Mark be able to deal with these two? And how will Zack and Mark deal with their mutual attraction?

Unexpected Dad

Tyler finds a big surprise waiting on his doorstep. Ready or not, Tyler is a dad. Tyler didn’t know he had a daughter until she suddenly

dropped into his life. Whether he is ready for her or not, little Julie needs a father. Or maybe two. Tyler and Jake have been best friends, inseparable since college. Now they have to adjust to Tyler's new role as a dad. As Jake helps him cope with being a new father to a little girl, Tyler might be looking at two big changes in his life.

More Than a Manny

A very young, rich widower needs a nanny, but a hot manny would be even better. That's where Nate comes in. Brent is a loving but irresponsible father to two young children from a marriage of convenience. He needs Nate in his life, but how will Nate, a first time nanny, fit into his unconventional household? The kids are a handful, especially little Georgie. Her big brother, Ricky, has a few issues of his own. But Nate is more than ready to take on the challenge and let all three of them steal his heart.

Duncan the Third

Patrick and his little sister, Wendy, have just moved into Duncan's building and that means trouble. Patrick is exactly the kind of guy Duncan can't resist. Together he and his little sister might be the family Duncan has been yearning for but only if he takes a chance and lets them into his heart. Unfortunately, Duncan hasn't been lucky when it comes to relationships. After getting his heart broken too many times, he has sworn off younger men. While Duncan struggles against his attraction to him, Patrick is determined to win him over. As Patrick tries to change his mind, can he also heal Duncan's broken heart?

Make It Better

A favor leads to a life changing experience. Ray is willing to do anything for the man he considers his savior. His mission of mercy is Marcus, a young man who can't overcome his guilt over a tragedy in his past. Is Ray making a terrible mistake giving his heart to him, or will his love for Marcus be strong enough to save him?

My Love Is Real: The Benson Brothers Story

For almost a year Sean and Brian thought they were brothers. Sean wants him more than anything, but will Brian ever accept his love? His pride is only one of the obstacles standing in their way. A dangerous man has a claim on Brian.